LIVING WITH GENUINE TAWHID

Witnessing the Signs of God through the Quranic Guidance

YAMINA BOUGUENAYA

Dear Faridah,
May Allah guide you
on the path of ease.
May He bless your life
with His love & guidance
in this world & in the next,
with peace, love, & prayers
Yamina

LIVING WITH GENUINE *TAWHID*

Witnessing the Signs of God through Quranic Guidance

YAMINA BOUGUENAYA

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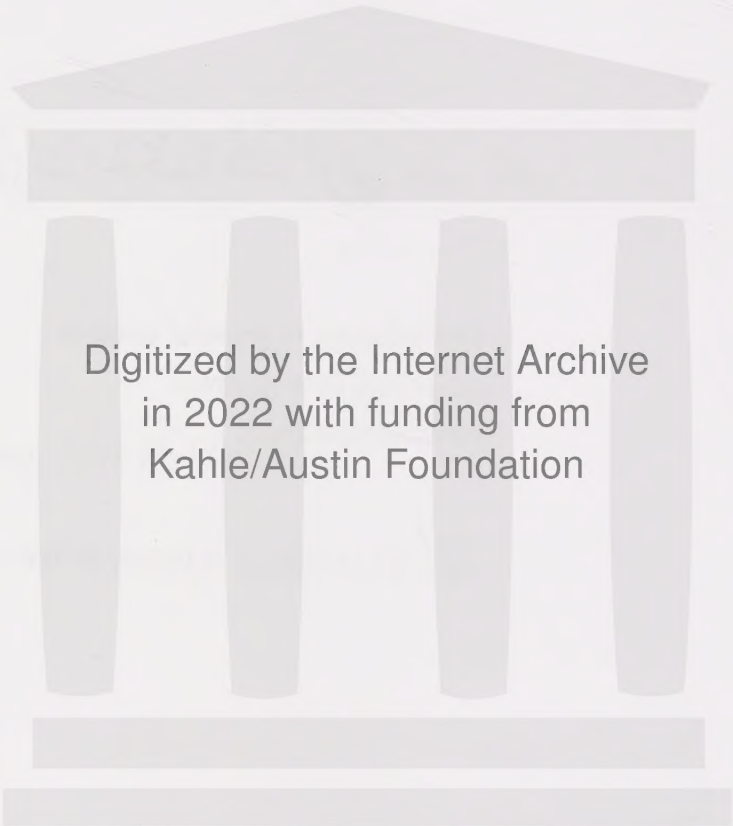
وَمَن يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرً كَثِيرًا

And whoever is granted wisdom
has indeed been granted
abundant goodness.

Quran, 2:269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PREFACE

This book is a result of a series of lectures delivered online as *Receiving Nur* monthly broadcasts in 2013-2014.[1] Receiving Nur is a non-profit organization that I founded together with several friends in 2012. It is the fruit of my personal journey in seeking to heal my fears and anxieties and live with the message of the Quran.

Much of my adult life, I knew that in times of hardships, I had to trust God's wisdom and mercy. Yet, it seemed like I was unable to surrender and let go. For years, it felt like if only I could figure out the meaning of what was going on in my life, then surely it'd become easier for me to surrender. Now, however, I realize that under my pretext of 'trying to understand' lay a fear to let go and trust. I realize that many of my questions, such as "Why did this happen to me?", were not genuine questions but objections under the guise of questions. What they really meant was, "I don't like what's happening to me; it shouldn't have had happened." Somehow, unbeknown to me, I was perceiving what was happening to me as unbearable. With that attitude, how could I see through and feel the mercy and wisdom in those unwanted events?

Based on the theological and spiritual knowledge that I had gained, I kept telling myself, "It's all from God so it's all good," and "I just need to put my trust in God, 'make *tawakkul*'" and so on. Yet, my heart was not at peace. It was just too hard to bear. Eventually, after getting tired of resisting and bumping against the seemingly harsh reality 'out there' which felt like a huge wall, I stopped…I felt overpowered, defeated…and I didn't want to fight anymore. Lo and behold, when I stopped struggling and grappling, something amazing happened: I felt a deep peace inside. Nothing

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[1] All the lecture recordings are available via Receiving Nur's YouTube channel.

had changed outside, yet I felt calm. I enjoyed that inner tranquility, and I prayed to remain there. I was not going to fight anymore. It is then that it dawned on me that surrendering is our natural (*fitri*) state of being: we are brought there when we actively stop resisting. And so it is with trust; we only need to intend to stop distrusting, to stop relying on ourselves or on anything other than our Sustainer (*Rabb*). That state of being was an opening through which I saw the world anew. I started to feel the guidance of my Creator come in…it was alive…it felt good… This was a major breakthrough.

This situation reminds of an incident that took place many years ago. I was attending a spiritual retreat with a group of women on the seashore. One day, as some of us were on a deserted beach, we heard someone screaming for help. One of the participants was drowning. It turned out that while she was taking a walk in the shallow waters, she had seen a crab, so she panicked and started to frantically run away from it only to find herself deep in water. She did not know how to swim. The only people who could possibly help were too far from us to make it in time, and none of the other women could swim. So, I started swimming towards the drowning woman as fast as I could, and when I reached her, I held her and asked her to stay still, explaining that the water would hold us up. But she continued to scream frantically using up all of her precious breath and pulling me with her into the deep waters again and again. I didn't know what to do, I was not trained in rescuing people. At the same time, I couldn't let go of her. So, we kept going in a circle, dipping in, coming back to the surface, dipping in again. Each time we came up, I breathed as deeply as I could, but I felt weaker and weaker. All I could do was pray, not in specific words (I didn't have the breath for it), but with my whole being. I prayed and I prayed… She kept pulling on me, and we kept going down to the bottom and back again to the surface. How many times? I have no idea. We were breathless, and I was amazed at how my friend could still scream so strongly in her breathlessness. How long did it last? I don't know; it could have been few seconds or few minutes or… It was as though time had stopped. It was frozen. Suddenly, the woman stopped struggling and became very still. So, I grabbed her and pulled her to the shore. I still can't remember how it happened—how could I pull her? It was more like we were

both pulled out together. She was safe…we were safe… Alhamdulillah, Praise be to God. I could finally breathe deeply in gratitude. A few hours later, that friend recounted that in her terrified state she did not even hear what I was telling her. But then, as she became weaker and had swallowed too much sea water, she felt she was going to die and she became aware of my presence. It is then that she thought to herself, "Since I'm going to die, let me die alone and not drag Yamina down to die with me," and she stopped pulling me down with her. In fact, she stopped struggling altogether. And it is when she gave up, when she became still, that I could pull her to the shore. *Subhanallah*…When she stopped fighting, she surrendered. And so it was with my life journey. This realization of the importance of surrendering was a significant breakthrough for me.

I became aware of what had held me back all those years. With that awareness, my life has since transformed in many wonderful ways. For instance, I realized that it is only when we are in a state of trust and surrender to the will of God (i.e. when we consciously stop resisting what is) that we become open to receive the wisdom of whatever is going on in our life. I understood that wisdom is given to those who trust and surrender. Yes, life may still be painful. Yes, it may still be hard. Yes, some things may still hurt. But nothing is meaningless; nothing is without aim. With this conscious and open attitude, we are able, God willing, to see the good within the 'bad' and "to find the cure within the malady itself, … the light within the darkness itself… the solace within the horror itself," as Imam Bediuzzaman Said Nursi wrote. After this breakthrough and the many transformations that ensued in my life, I decided to leave my academic career in order to dedicate my time to sharing my experiences with others and helping them along their life journey. I started doing retreats and online classes with my closest friends, and in time, the circle grew until we decided to go public. This is how Receiving Nur was born. And this book is the first textual fruit of our Receiving Nur Quranic Wisdom lectures.

The purpose of this book is to show how faith in the One actually matches human nature and how it speaks profoundly to our hearts and intellect. The Quranic emphasis on *tawhid* coheres with our reality and enables us to flourish in the best way as human beings.

While the book first addresses Muslims who feel at least some vague need to understand the Quran better, it also aims to speak to those who do not consider themselves Muslim. In other words, the book is meant not only for those who are already interested in the Quran as Muslims, but also for those who are open to exploring reasons to take interest in it as *a human being*. At the core of being human lies our profound sense of connection to the rest of the world, our love and attachment to life and beauty and justice, our deep longing for eternity and justice. In the midst of an apparently passing and unpredictable world, it is only through guidance from our Maker that we are able to make sense of our lives and affirm our potentials as human beings. In this sense, this book is an invitation to a journey of discovery—through questioning our cliché assumptions about the world and ourselves and reflecting on the source and meaning of our existence in light of enlightening cues from divine guidance. One need not be a believer in the Quran being God's word before reading this book. Rather an open heart and mind are sufficient to embark on this journey of discovery and understanding.

In preparing these lectures, I have benefited tremendously from the works of the late Muslim theologian and exegete, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *rahimahu Allah*. I gratefully acknowledge that my approach to the Quran has been transformed through encountering his works, the *Risale-i Nur*, which have been for me a beacon of wisdom and compassion. All praise be to the One, *alhamdu-lillah*. Through the *Risale*, I learned to read the Quran anew and see how it enlightens my life and the universe as it deciphers the signs of God inscribed in creation.[2]

Many thanks also to Kelly Tan for her very helpful feedback, fine-tuned editing, and meticulous proofreading.

In translating the Qur'anic selections in these invocations, I have consulted several English translations, and frequently made use of Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an*, with some

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[2] Major volumes of *Risale-i Nur* have been translated into English by Sukran Vahide and are available on various websites, such as http://www.erisale.com/index.jsp?locale=en

modifications. When I used Arabic terms in the text, I did for the purpose of introducing original Quranic terms and making them familiar. I have kept the diacritics to the minimum to make reading easier.

May God make this book a means of wisdom and compassion. Amin.

INTRODUCTION

by Kelly Tan

People often ask me, "When did you accept Islam?" The question usually comes shortly after an exchange of names, often when there seems to be little time to talk. I never know what to say. If I say something definite and simple like, "Two years ago in April," it feels like a lie. Yet this answer usually satisfies the questioner because the first utterance of *shahada*, the Islamic testimony of faith, is known to mark the official moment of conversion. That is, in the moment I said aloud, "*I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God*," I allegedly entered *islam*. Literally, that means I entered a *state of peaceful surrender to God's will*. Yet somehow it didn't seem to work quite that way.

It is not that it is wrong to say that by uttering the *shahada* one enters the fold of Islam. Surely that moment can be pivotal and profound. It's just that there is so much more to it. Acceptance is an ongoing process. The relationship between *shahada* and *islam*–between witnessing God's Oneness and surrendering to His will—cannot be confined to a single moment.

In *Living with Genuine Tawhid*, Dr. Yamina Bouguenaya brings forth the deeper reality of the multiple ways in which *shahada* does open the door (and keep the door open) to *islam*. She unpacks the layers of meaning and implications within the phrase "There is no god

but God" to show how meditating on that statement truly opens the heart to faith, gratitude, and peace. She shows how both bearing witness and surrendering are dynamic processes inextricably linked to one another. As she brings to light our most mundane hopes and fears as well as our most profound existential questions, Bouguenaya reveals our real need to witness the signs of God's Oneness if we hope to truly find peace and surrender, to truly inhabit *islam,* in our daily lives.

We are beings who easily forget. As days roll into days, familiar terms grow stale, and rites intended to cultivate virtue and deepen awareness can become a matter of habit. We are beings who need renewal—of understanding, of intention, of effort. We need *conscious* engagement to align our subtler inner movements—of thought, intention, and feeling—with the outward motions of our practice. This level of engagement takes devotion, and it is easy to neglect.

It is easy to be distracted from truly engaging religious teaching to merely identifying with it, relating to it mostly on social and conceptual planes. When we take faith for granted or assume it is complete by a mere declaration of belief or performance of rites, religion ceases to serve as a guide for life. It ceases to sustain our connection to the divine. Instead it becomes primarily an aspect of our identity. I am Muslim, we say, as though it were as simple as checking a box in a demographic survey. We forget that religion, *al-din,* is a path. Or perhaps we see that it is but simply don't direct our efforts to actually walk upon it. Imagine a person who finds a path which will purify his heart, but who simply sits on a bench alongside it, stretches out his legs, and spends his days pleased with himself for being amongst those who have found the path, who know the way to God—yet he never follows it. What good, then, is this path for him?

There is a difference between stating belief and truly believing, between identifying with a truth and living that truth. The difference may hint at what distinguishes commitment to ideology from the cultivation of wisdom. Our world could do better relinquishing some of the former and focusing on the latter. Islam (as well as any true teaching) is not in its essence antagonistic. It

does not teach us to divide the world into who is good or evil, identifying collective groups of believers and infidels and pitting one against another. Islam does not teach division, but rather, discernment. In this way, it does involve a parsing out, but it is a parsing out of a subtle, wise, and gentle nature.

The Quran urges us to directly observe and contemplate all phenomena from the movement of water throughout the earth, to the movement of sorrow, joy, peace, anger, or greed through our hearts. As we ponder what lies within us and around us, we become well-versed in the remarkable intricacy and consistency of the laws which bind the material and moral fabric of the universe. The Quran serves as a guide to purify the heart. It shows the way to uproot greed, fear, ignorance, and hatred. Only it isn't quite as arduous and crude as uprooting. It is more that those ways of understanding and relating to life that provide fertile ground for such tenacious sentiments simply dry up, while the ways of understanding that cultivate gratitude, compassion, and peace deepen.

The capacity to cultivate gratitude, peace, faith, and compassion and to abandon fear, greed, and arrogance is much needed in our world today. We live in times when such wisdom is scarce. Fear, greed, and ignorance are widespread. At the macro level, this manifests in seemingly endless conflict and war, environmental degradation, and hostile political rhetoric. We are also witnessing unprecedented levels of wealth disparity, where both extreme poverty and everyday opulence have become the norm. At the micro level, many of us struggle with debilitating levels of stress, sorrow, and anxiety. We attempt to secure our well-being through careful planning, wise investments, and various types of insurance. We seem to have an insatiable need to own or enjoy more and to optimize the quality of our lives, yet all the while an unsettling sense of worthlessness or meaninglessness gnaws at us. So we seek to fill it, to bury it with more work, more fun, more activity, more productivity, more things... It is time we stop and ask: What is this fury of activity? Where is the wisdom in the turning of this world? Whose race are we running? And where are we heading?

The Quran was sent, Bouguenaya reminds us, not to simply inform, but to transform. Thus, to simply relate to it as we have been trained to relate to other forms of knowledge will leave its most valuable gifts behind. I feel we have an excess of information in this age. We are rather obsessed with it, accumulating it as though it will save us from the messes we have made. I don't think we need more information. Living ethically, healing the old wounds of ourselves, the earth, and humankind, will not come from knowing more but from, as Bouguenaya reminds us, learning to relate differently to what we already know. If knowledge is a blend of information and wisdom, the dominant systems of knowledge today seem largely weighed down by the former and nearly devoid of the latter. We need more balance. We need to wisdom; we need to remember how to discern, how to live, how to inhabit this world, this life in peace.

This world is finite, in space and time, and we cannot simply bank on getting it all to get what is good, on amassing knowledge, ideas, and things simply because we figure more is better. Our lives are finite. When we choose one path, we cannot take the others as well. We cannot both accumulate with abandon and focus on the basics. Every way of being opens some possibilities and closes others. Wisdom shows us where to place our attention, effort, and understanding such that life becomes of benefit.

In the following pages, Bouguenaya shows us how the guidance of the Quran offers a way of inhabiting this world that is radically different from the current tendency to be lost in greed, delusion, and fear. It offers a way of setting down the fervor of trying to extract more and more from seemingly limited resources, a way of letting go of the survivalist mentality with its fear of inferiority, scarcity, illness, loss, and death. It teaches a way of being content and harmonized with this life, this world, all that lies within it and beyond.

The Quran teaches a way of being, a way of seeing, of relating to everyone and everything around you, and to whatever may happen, good or bad, in this life. If every way closes down some possibilities and opens up others, why is this way of being important? Why was it revealed to us? What does it promise? What does it guide

us to? What does recognizing God's Comprehensiveness open us to? How does living in surrender to the will of God affect how we inhabit this world? What does it even look like? And if surrender is a path, how does one find it? How do we follow it and where might it lead us? What kind of living, what kind of worlds are possible with this way of being?

Bouguenaya's work, her talks and writings, are always anchored in these kinds of central questions, in what really matters, what really counts, now and in the end. She brings us to the heart of *islam*, the living art of surrendering to the will of God. Familiar terms and concepts are revealed in a new light and take on deeper relevance in our lives. As we read her words, we begin to see how the different parts of the Quranic message fit together. Bouguenaya reawakens the meaning of utterances so familiar they often bypass our hearts even as they roll fluidly off our tongues. *La ilahah illallah.* There is no god but God. What does it mean? Why is it repeated so often in the Quran and in worship? Bouguenaya returns us to these basics, and stays there, allowing their profound implications to seep in.

At a time when religion is often rendered (and even propagated) as ideology, as a fundamentally historical and political phenomenon, or merely as a source of social identity, Yamina's work reminds us that *islam* is, in truth, a refreshing and healing way of being in this world, and beyond—a way of being from which we have much to learn, for which we have much to hope.

CHAPTER ONE

Superficial *Tawhid* Shrouded in the Fog of Heedlessness

When we wake up in the morning and it is sunny, light and beautiful, what comes to mind first? Do we relate this beauty to the sunrays, the season, or time of day or do we relate it to our Creator and think about its creation? When it rains, what is our first thought? Do we relate it to the changes in wind direction or to our Creator? Do we think of it as merely another wet day we must endure or as a blessing to the earth and its creatures? When eating something delicious, what are our first thoughts? Do we focus on the food itself and think, "I love this food. It is so delicious. How did you make it? Where did you buy it?" Or do we feel grateful and reflect on its true Owner and Giver? Does this food bring us closer to our Maker? Does it make us love our Sustainer (*Rabb*) more?

When we cook something that turns out right and everybody likes it, what are our first thoughts? Do we feel proud of ourselves and take credit for it? Or are we thankful that our Creator blessed us with the ingredients, the heat to cook them, and the senses we used to adjust the taste? Do we take this opportunity to reflect on how we have been gifted with the fulfillment of our hunger, our senses and our pleasure all at the same time?

Alternatively, when we cook something, and it turns out badly, do we stop and reflect on all the times it has turned out well, realizing that each time was an exceptional gift? Or do we try to justify the failure? It must have been the oven, the type of flour, maybe that new pan. Interestingly, when it is bad, it is because of everything else but me, but when it is good, it is all about me—I did it!

What about when we write an article? If it gets published and we receive praise from our colleagues, do we feel grateful or proud? What comes first? Are we thankful for the ideas that were gifted to us? Do we pray that these gifts benefit ourselves and others in

God's name? Or do we get excited about becoming successful and hope that we will receive more praise and admiration from others? And when our work is not good and we receive criticism, how do we respond? Do we feel bad, angry, or embarrassed? When something unwanted happens, when a paper is not accepted for publication for instance, what is our first reaction? Frustration and objection? Or surrender and acceptance?

Remaining Conscious of God

> *Will you not, then, remain conscious of Him?*
>
> (Quran, Mu'minun, 23:23)[3]

> *Remember your Lord within yourself, with humility and with awe and do not raise your voice, in the morning and afternoon and do not be of the heedless* (ghafilin).
>
> (Quran, A'raf, 7:205)

Considering the reflections above, we may ask ourselves: throughout everyday joys and struggles, how often do we remember God? Do we feel dejected during setbacks, angry about failures, boastful with success, and envious of others? What is our first response? What cycles of thoughts and feelings do we come back to or get stuck in? Do we live with the awareness that everything comes from the Most Wise, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful, and Most-Beneficent? With this knowledge, are we at peace? Do our hearts swell with gratitude and praise? Or is there a gap between what we know—or have been told—and how we feel? Do God's compassion, mercy, wisdom, and beneficence surround us and fill us? Or do they seem remote?

If we find that God does seem remote despite our conceptual belief in Him, we are not alone. This is a common human condition, and for that reason, the Quran draws our attention to it, as for example, in Surah Luqman, when God says:

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[3] See also: Quran, Shu'ara, 26:161, 177.

> *And thus it is with most people: if you ask them, "Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?" –they will surely answer, "God." Say: "[Then you ought to know that] all praise is due to God!"—for most of them do not know [what this implies]. Unto God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Truly God alone is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due!*
>
> (Quran, Luqman, 31:25-26)

"Unto God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth"—this means everything around us from the whole universe to the littlest things in it. It all belongs to God, so when we receive anything within it, all praise is due to Him alone. Let's think of a simple example from everyday life. When we eat a piece of delicious fruit, what are our first thoughts? Do we think of how much we love the fruit for the pleasure we think it gives us? Or do we feel grateful to the Maker of the fruit? When we finish and say *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), do we truly feel our hearts swell with gratitude for God? Often when it comes to the little things in life and how we engage them from moment to moment, our awareness of God is very dim or not even in the picture at all. At best, our belief feels more like a vague sense in the back of our minds without a clear connection to what lies in front of us. In this case, faith remains limited to the realm of intuition but does not permeate our consciousness, our way of thinking, feeling, and relating.

Indeed, most people sense instinctively that there must be a Creator. When we see a well-ordered arrangement—such as a sturdy, elegant bridge or building—we realize, without having to think much about it, that it has a maker. Similarly, when we look at the universe, in its order and majesty, we intuitively feel the existence of a Maker, even if we do not reflect on it. We instinctively sense that a higher power regulates this universe. But this sense does not elucidate who the Creator is or explain our relationship to Him. At this stage, 'God' could be anything. Some describe Him as a 'universal force' that supports the existence of the universe. Others have construed Him as a 'first cause,' the 'prime mover' that set the universe in motion and then more or less left it to continue functioning independently in accordance with its inherent properties. Such explanations push God to the

beginning of creation and confine His role to that of a cause, albeit the primary one. Indeed, intuition of the divine often boils down to merely not denying God. But not denying is not the same as knowing and accepting. Not denying God is not the same as truly believing.

Thus, even when we say there is a Creator, we may find that we cannot connect this fact to what is going on around us right now. Nothing here and now seems related to the Creator. In the back of our minds we admit that somehow it was all created, but most of the time, we are not even thinking about its creation per se. We live disconnected from an awareness of the divine.

The Quran teaches that true belief in God depends on our awareness of *tawhid*,[4] an Arabic word commonly translated as *divine unity* or *Oneness of God*. In fact, *tawhid* is a verbal noun that literally means 'unifying' or 'making one.' It refers to the reality that the whole of creation proceeds from one unique Creator and Originator of all beings, things and events. Most people familiar with the tenets of faith in Islam tend to think of *tawhid* as the assertion: "God is one. He has no partner or like, and this universe is His." However, even when we say this and think it is true, we often live our lives as though it were not the case. We remain oblivious of the reality of *tawhid*. For, admitting something does not necessarily mean that we choose to live in accordance with it. Thus, what may seem like an affirmation of divine unity is, in fact, superficial *tawhid*. It is only the first step towards the long journey of cultivating genuine *tawhid*. It is not the end but just the beginning because there are many degrees of awareness of the reality of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is something we live with; it is not something we know, learn and say at one time. It is not just information, although it starts with knowledge. Saying "God is One" does not necessarily

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[4] The term *tawhid* is a verbal noun *(masdar)* form of *wahhada* (to make one or to unite) which is derived from the root *w–h-d*. It carries the connotation of a continuous, dynamic process rather than a static state of being. It implies that one should in a sense 'perform' or 'do' *tawhid* as opposed to just 'know' or 'affirm' that it is true. Thus, although it is usually translated as 'unity,' it can be more accurately rendered as 'unification,' and 'consolidation,' which carry a stronger imperative. Note also that the word for unity in Arabic is '*wahda*' and not '*tawhid*.'

mean that we are fully aware of the meaning of divine oneness and what it entails in our daily lives. In other words, it does not mean that it has transformed our outlook on life. If it were that simple, why would the Quran need to teach us what *tawhid* really means in such detail and with so much emphasis? *Tawhid* is the Quran's most central, oft-repeated message—yet how often do we reflect upon it? Do we hear how it speaks *to us*?

Let's contemplate the following verses from *Surat al-Mu'minun*. Here we are shown again how despite recognition that God creates and sustains all things, people often remain heedless of Him. Yet these verses also point to the means God has provided for us to reconcile this gap between superficial belief and deeper awareness and faith.

> *[O people! Pay heed to God's signs,] for it is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds: [yet] how seldom are you grateful!*
> *And it is He who has caused you to multiply on earth; and unto Him you shall be gathered.*
> *And He it is who grants life and deals death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason?*
> *But nay, they speak as the people of olden times did speak.*
> *They say: 'What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we, forsooth, be raised from the dead?*
> *Indeed, this [very thing] we have been promised--we and our forefathers--long ago! This is nothing but fables of ancient times!"*
> *Say: "Unto whom belongs the earth and all that lives there on? [Tell me this] if you happen to know [the answer]!"*
> *They will reply: "Unto God." Say: "Will you not, then, bethink yourselves?"*
> *Say: "Who is it that sustains the seven heavens and is enthroned in His awesome almightiness?"*
> *They will reply: "[All this power belongs] to God." Say: 'Will you not, then, remain conscious of Him?"*

Say: "In whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and who is it that protects, the while there is no protection against Him? [Tell me this] if you happen to know!"
They will reply: "[All this power belongs] to God." Say: 'How, then, can you be so deluded?"
Nay, We have conveyed unto them the truth: and yet, behold, they are indeed liars, [intent on lying to themselves]!

(Quran, Mu'minun, 23:77-90)

Here, God is asking us questions to focus our attention and to interrupt our habitual way of thinking so that we may reflect. *Will you not then use your reason… bethink yourselves… remain conscious of Him?* Our reason, our thoughtfulness as well as our faculties of observation together provide the means out of delusion and toward consciousness of Him and a deeper affirmation of His Oneness, of *tawhid*. God has "*endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds*"—the capacity to witness His blessings and to live with mindfulness— "[*yet how seldom are you grateful!*" He has given us the capacity to be mindful and thereby, grateful, but we often squander this gift. Like the people in the verses above, if asked, "*Unto whom belongs the earth and all that lives thereon?*" we may answer, even without hesitation, "*To God.*" We may *know* that He sustains all the heavens and earth, has dominion over all things, and protects all. Yet, we remain deluded, *unconscious* that all that surrounds us is from Him alone, that they are all signs (*ayaat*) indicating meanings beyond themselves and making their Creator and Sustainer (*Rabb*) known to us. That is, we need to use our hearing, sight, and minds to observe consciously, to 'read' the signs around us and to be grateful to God alone. In other words, we need not only recognize His power but also the fact that He has given us the faculties to read His signs. Otherwise, we are in a situation of double heedlessness: not reading the signs and forgetting the great gift that we have been given to read the signs.

For even as we conceptually recognize God's ultimate dominion, when faced with specific scenarios, we lose sight of His Power. "Sure, He alone grants life and deals death, but He can't possibly resurrect us," the people in the verses above insist. "Of course,"

we might say, "He has dominion over all things, but is my burnt dinner or promotion at work really in His hands?" It is as though when we zoom out, we can acknowledge God, but as soon as we zoom in, He disappears from our awareness. And thus, we find our stated beliefs in contradiction with our responses to everyday life.

This inner contradiction is addressed at the end of the verses quoted above: *Nay, We have conveyed unto them the truth: and yet, behold, they are indeed liars, intent on lying to themselves!* Why are these people called liars? How is being deluded or unconscious a matter of lying? Lying refers to contradicting or concealing the truth. It has many degrees, but one very simple kind of lying that we often do unintentionally is lying to ourselves: we think of ourselves as believers in *tawhid*, and yet our way of life belies that claim. Why is this so? Because living with the reality of *tawhid* is a conscious choice that requires intentional living. Whereas we often live in *ghafla*, heedlessness. Clearly we cannot be honest with ourselves while we are unconscious of the beliefs that truly govern our lives and have made no effort to question those beliefs that we often take for granted. When we fail to notice the discrepancy between our claims about *tawhid* and our reality, we continue to deceive ourselves by claiming belief in *tawhid*. This is a kind of hypocrisy; we claim one thing while not actually living it. For example, we say we believe in God, but we live unaware of what such belief entails. We may say we are *Muslims*, which literally means *one who surrenders to the will of God*, but we are really just concerned with our own will. Our beliefs remain out of sync with how we make sense of and react to our experiences. We are often not aware of these contradictions, but that is not an excuse. We must make the intention to achieve inner alignment, that is, a life without internal contradictions.

A life of integrity requires *intentional being* and cultivated awareness. We attend to many things every day: we eat every day, clean every day, make schedules for work, and anticipate the traffic or weather, but when it comes to belief in God, we are inclined to take our belief for granted. We think that we already believe in God, and therefore need not reflect on it more. Because of this, we make no intention to live according to our belief, and we do not develop our awareness, so often our priorities get turned upside down. And

because we are heedless of our real priorities, we find ourselves living in contradiction to them.

Consider our basic physical needs such as food, water and air. Which one do we need most? We spend the most time, energy and money on food although we can very well survive for days without it. As for water, we usually take it for granted and realize its value only when we do not have it even though it is very difficult to go for a day without water, as we know very well when we fast in the summer. As for air, we seldom think about it. Yet, of all of these, air is what we need most. We cannot even go on a few minutes without breathing, and yet it is the one we are the least grateful for because we take it so much for granted; we are often unaware of it. The same lack of awareness applies to emotional and spiritual needs such as safety, having a purpose in life, friendship, and compassion. We do not stop and think about any of these until we are deprived of them. We do not, however, have to wait until that point to understand their value. When we become aware of our needs and priorities, then everything in life starts changing. We spend less time worrying about non-essential things and more time obtaining and appreciating our true priorities. The Quran tells us repeatedly that belief in God is not enough, but belief in God alone, and nothing else beside Him—that is, *tawhid*—is the number one priority. If we take our belief in God for granted, then we remain heedless of the fact that our humanity and our soul are in need of *tawhid*.

Responding to the Divine Call of *Tawhid*

And be not of those who ascribe partners.

(Quran, An'am, 6:14)[5]

The Quran offers sincere advice. A true friend may not always tell me things that I want to hear or that make me feel good, but she also would not point out my flaws just to make me feel bad. Likewise, if the Quran reveals our ingratitude, shallow faith, or self-contradictions, it is not to make us feel bad or defeated—assigned

[5]Also in Quran, Yunus, 10:105 and Qasas, 28:87.

to the category of the heedless. On the contrary, it is to help guide us out of the present misery and future strife caused by those states of being. So rather than feeling inadequate or guilty about not being more fully conscious of God, we can rely on this guidance and, listening carefully to what it is telling us, look deeper into our condition and embrace the opportunity to grow.

The Quran repeats over and over that even as people believe in God, they often remain unaware. We need this reminder to wake us from our complacency and to realize that stated belief is not sufficient, we must become conscious of God. But how? Does God reveal what exactly gets in the way of our becoming truly conscious of Him? Consider these passages that echo the reminder above:

> *Say, 'Who is it that provides you with sustenance from the sky and from the earth? Or who is it that has full power over [your] hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that rules and regulates all that exists? "They will say, "God." Say, "Will you not then, become [fully] conscious of Him?*
> *Seeing that He is God, your Sustainer, the Ultimate Truth? For after the truth [has been forsaken], what is there [left] but error? How, then, can you lose sight of the truth?*
>
> (Quran, Yunus, 10:31-32)

Here again, God describes the situation in which people do not deny Him—they even acknowledge that he "rules and regulates all that exists"—but still they are not conscious of Him.

Who are these people who have "lost sight of the truth?" Looking at a couple verses before the selection above, we see whom God is addressing: *Those who ascribe partners with God* (Quran, Yunus; 10:28). Ascribing partners to God is called *shirk*, and here we are shown how it is *shirk* that stunts our faith, contracts our awareness, and causes us to live (that is, to feel, think, and respond to life events) in contradiction with our stated beliefs. This verse draws our attention to our lack of awareness even when we agree that God, *Allah*, is the sole provider of everything and is the only ruler over

all that exists.[6] We might still not be conscious of Him despite this affirmation. We might still lose sight of the ultimate truth that God is the actual and only Sustainer *(Rabb).*[7]

> *Verily, your* Rabb *is God, who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness. He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit, with the sun and the moon and the stars subservient to His command: Verily, His is all creation and all command. Blessed is God, the Sustainer (Rabb) of all the worlds!*
>
> (Quran, A'raf, 7:54)

> *It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy, and has formed you - and formed you so well - and provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life. Such is God, your*
>
> *Rabb: Blessed, then, is God, the Sustainer (Rabb) of all the worlds!*
>
> (Quran, Ghafir, 40:64)

In Quranic verses 10:31-32 above, it is those who commit *shirk*, literally 'those who ascribe partners with God,' that are described as losing sight of the truth. But what is '*shirk*'? What does it mean to ascribe partners with God? As noted earlier, it is not only people explicitly believing in gods besides God. *Shirk* may not always involve actively denying God; such intentional denial is more commonly referred to as *kufr* in the Quran.[8] But here, God is telling

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[6] '*Allah*' is the Arabic word for 'God,' (literally "the god.") Christian Arabs, for instance, call God 'Allah' in the same way as Spanish speakers call Him 'Dios' and French speakers call Him 'Dieu.'For an etymological review of the word 'Allah', see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, (Zondervan, 2007), pp 27- 31.

[7] *Rabb* is translated as Lord or Sustainer. I used the second one as it is closer to the original Arabic meaning.

[8] The root verb of the infinitive noun *kufr* is *kafara*, which is derived from the trilateral root *K-F-R*. It originally means 'to cover (a thing).' In verse 57:20 of the Quran, for instance, the tillers of the soil are called, without disparaging implication, *kuffar* (plural of *kafir* i.e. 'one who covers'), in the sense that they

us that *shirk* also happens despite acknowledging God, despite even affirming His Oneness and sole sovereignty. We may think we are affirming divine unity while making things, unbeknownst to us, into idols.

Note that the Quran does not tell us anything that we could figure out without it telling us. And here the Quran is telling us that we could be thinking that we believe everything is in God's hands, yet still remain unconscious of Him, deluded, and ungrateful. What is it that blocks our gratitude, our complete trust and reliance? We are 'attributing partners to Him.' How? We may think it was our intelligence and hard work that got our work published for instance. We think this awful rain came from that cold front that passed through from the north. We may assume our uncooperative colleague is the reason we have these chronic headaches. We are sure that being hired by such and such company will provide us with the sense of security and self-worth we need…

This habitual attribution to everything but God may not be done intentionally. Often times, we think that because we do not intend to be in *shirk*, we are not in *shirk*, but that is not the case. Attributing partners to God is often not intentional. But that is the issue: genuine *tawhid* requires intentional belief. That is why the Quran keeps warning us against heedlessness, *ghafla*. No one says, "I am going to commit *shirk*." However, just as someone who drives while drunk is responsible for whatever might happen, if we live our life in a state of heedlessness (*ghafla*), we are likewise responsible for stumbling into *shirk*. We do not fail a class because we intend to do so; rather, we fail because we do not intend to pass and do not study accordingly. Not wanting to fail does not excuse failure. If we do not want to fail a class, then we must intend to pass and act accordingly. So, there is work to be done. Likewise,

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cover the sown seeds with earth. The term *kufr* has thus a connotation of 'concealing' something that exists or 'denying' something that is true. Generally, it is used in the Quran to mean 'denial of the truth' or 'refusal to acknowledge the truth' and it is conventionally translated as unbelief. Of course, *shirk* is also a form of covering up the truth. So, *kufr* and *shirk* overlap in the Quranic usage as well.

unless we intentionally believe in God alone, we are in danger of falling into *shirk*.

Questioning the Seeming Causes

Have they, perchance, feet on which they could walk?

(Quran, A'raf, 7:195)[9]

Here is a real situation demonstrating the susceptibility of superficial *tawhid* to *shirk* that a friend of mine graciously shared with me. During a conversation with another person, she said that God creates everything including the plant in front of them. The person asked, "Would the plant grow if it was not watered?" My friend said, "Of course, it would not." The other person said, "Then, is it God or the water that causes the plant to grow?" My friend did not know what to say and felt like saying, "God and the water together cause the plant to grow," but she did not say it, because she "knew" that would be a *shirk* statement—so she paused. For her, that was a breakthrough. It was her first moment of realizing that her understanding of God and *tawhid* was not grounded. She did not quite know what *tawhid* meant *vis à vis* the unfolding universe in front of her. She realized that her understanding of *tawhid* was too vague and that it was not based on observing nature. In other words, hers was just a "belief" without evidence. She had not borne witness with her own eyes.

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[9] *Will they, then, ascribe divinity, side by side with Him, unto beings that cannot create anything since they themselves are being created and neither are able to give them succor nor can [they] succor themselves and, if you pray to them for guidance, do not respond to you? As far as you are concerned, it is all one whether you invoke them or keep silent. Verily, all those whom you invoke beside God are but created beings like yourselves: invoke them, then, and let them answer your prayer - if what you claim is true! Have these, perchance, feet on which they could walk? Or have they hands with which they could grasp? Or have they eyes with which they could see? Or have they ears with which they could hear? Say [O Prophet]: "Summon to your aid all those to whom you ascribe a share in God's divinity, and thereupon contrive [anything you may wish] against me, and give me no respite! Verily, my protector is God, who has bestowed this divine writ from on high: for it is He who protects the righteous, whereas all those whom you invoke in His stead are neither able to give you help nor help themselves; and if you pray unto them for guidance, they do not hear; and though you may imagine that they behold you, they do not see.* (Quran, 7:191-198)

Let us reflect on this question for a moment: Can we say without any doubt that God alone makes the plant grow? Do I feel in my heart that God and God alone makes the plant grow? Where is the role of water in all this? But without water there would be no plant!!! How can we resolve this dilemma? It is solvable, we just need to pay a little more attention to the world around us. Here is a clue to start with: Without a bulb, there would be no light in the room I am sitting in right now. Does that mean that the bulb itself makes light? Let us explore the path to the true *tawhid* more by locating both the source of and solution to superficial *tawhid*.

Imam Said Nursi reveals the common mindset underlying superficial *tawhid* with a meaningful parable as follows: A rich man's vast goods arrive in a town market. Everyone in town figures all those piles of goods must belong to this rich man because one way to find out that the goods belong to him is simply to note, as a common person would do, that no one in town apart from the rich man could afford such a vast amount of goods. But what if some of the goods get stolen? Then those who steal some of the items may claim ownership of small parts of that wealth. The common person would have no means of rejecting their claim, because his only criterion for richness is the amount of wealth, so in his view, only the rich man can own a large amount of goods. However, this does not exclude the possibility that a poor person could claim a small part of those goods. In this way, though it's obvious that a poor person could not own all those goods, many poor people could steal small parts of the goods, each claiming ownership of their small part only. In this way, not much would remain of the rich man's goods.

Likewise, we may claim that the whole universe belongs to God, but what about the seemingly small parts such as the food we eat, the air we breathe, the rain that benefits us, or our recovery from disease? Based on our limited understanding of what constitutes 'small,' we are unable to reject claims of ownership of those seemingly small things by something or someone other than God. We are not aware of why these 'small parts' can actually only belong to One Creator.

Realizing this situation is a matter of pausing, reflecting, and interrupting the way we take things for granted. In our daily lives, we generally tend to assume that small parts of the universe are disconnected pieces, connected to their immediate neighbors only. We evaluate the world around us accordingly, in a superficial manner. When we see a plant growing after it takes in water and dying without it, we immediately assume that water is responsible for the plant's life. However, just because a plant grows after being watered, that does not mean that lifeless water *causes* the plant to grow or that it gives it life. Consistently consecutive events do not prove causality.

For example, whenever we press the on/off button of a TV, a picture appears on the screen. When we do not press it, there is no picture. Based on this simple fact, can we conclude that pressing the button makes the picture? What deceives us to believe that causes are involved in the production of effects is the fact that the absence of the cause results in the non-existence of the effect, i.e. no button pressed, no picture. From there, we erroneously conclude that the presence of the cause results in the existence of the effect, pressing the button produces the picture. In reality, the fact that the result is not achieved when one thing is missing is not proof that the cause in question produces the effect. It merely means it is one of many conditions that must be aligned for the effect to occur.

In the TV example, the button does not produce the image; it is simply designed by someone to be a precursor for the appearance of the image. Would there be any picture if there were no external broadcasting? The button is merely part of the order of the full system of broadcasting technology. Whoever made the TV itself intentionally situated the button in the apparatus so that the picture would appear when pressed. In a similar fashion, imagine the door to the kitchen. Just because the food comes from the kitchen, it does not mean that the door of the kitchen is making the food. It is not the source. Likewise, water—and sunlight, soil, and air—are part of a tree's growth but not the source of it. Why not? Because none of these 'causes' actually have the comprehensive wisdom, knowledge and power to create an intricate and alive organism like a plant. In fact, these 'causes' are themselves being created. Water,

for instance, is brought into being from two completely different elements and it manifests completely new properties, different from the combined properties of hydrogen and oxygen. That is why the Quran repeatedly calls us to reflect:

> *Now those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything, since they themselves are being created.*
>
> (Quran, Nahl, 16:20)[10]

While claiming that God is the true owner of the universe, we often act as though it belonged to everything else (or itself, its own parts) and that is the failure of superficial *tawhid*. With this perspective, we can claim that the universe belongs to God yet see no contradiction in ascribing the growth of the tree (like a small part of the rich man's goods) to blind and lifeless things such as water, air and sunlight (the poor people). Within this superficial understanding of the world, all kinds of (poor) causes can claim all kinds of effects and results (small parts of the goods). Since every being or thing is created through causes, all of God's property, all of His creation may end up being divided among them. Now, to criticize the flimsy and insubstantial logic of superficial *tawhid* does not mean that we should reject that there is an order in the world. Indeed, there is an order and everything comes into existence through something else. However, this does not mean that the causes themselves *create*. The Quran repeatedly calls us to think and see that causes themselves *are being created*—they cannot sustain their own existence let alone produce anything else.[11]

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[10] God also says, "*Say: 'Have you ever [really] considered those beings and forces to whom you ascribe a share in God's divinity, [and] whom you invoke beside God? Show me what it is that they have created on earth - or do [you claim that] they have a share in [governing] the heavens?" ... Verily, it is God [alone] who upholds the heavens and the earth, lest they deviate [from their orbits] - for if they should ever deviate, there is none that could uphold them after He will have ceased to do so. [But,] verily, He is ever-forbearing, much-for-giving!"* (Quran, Fatir, 35:40-41) Also see Quran, Furqan, 25:3.

[11] Indeed, everything at all moments is being created and sustained by the Creator, "*there is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock [I.e., there is no living being over which He has not complete control and which is not entirely dependent on Him.*" (Quran, Hud, 11:56).

> *They ascribe to God partners that cannot create anything since they themselves are being created, and neither are they able to help them nor can they help themselves.*
>
> (Quran, A'raf, 7:191-192)

The Quran teaches us to ask questions that push us beyond our superficial thinking, questions that dislodge our habits of perception. The moment we start asking such questions, things become clearer. Can elements which are themselves created really create something else? Do they possess life-giving qualities?

> *Have they, perchance, feet on which they could walk? Or have they hands with which they could grasp? Or have they eyes with which they could see? Or have they ears with which they could hear?*
>
> (Quran, A'raf, 7:195)

We ought to ask whether water, air, soil, and sunlight actually possess the qualities needed to grow a tree. Do they have the knowledge and wisdom required to plan out the design? Do they have the artistic capacity to bring it forth? Do these unconscious and lifeless entities have life-giving power? Is there anything in water that can make a tree grow? Without asking these questions, we take for granted that water possesses the qualities needed for the tree to grow. But these qualities exceed its properties. They entail knowledge and power over countless other things, as well as the capacity to see, plan, and manage complex processes.[12] However, water cannot possess such qualities and capabilities. Can water give life when it itself is lifeless? Or must it be that life is *given through* lifeless water?

Shirk does not only occur in divinity (*uluhiyya*) such as when we ascribe partners with God, but also in sustainership (*rububiya*), when we ascribe partners with the *Rabb* or Sustainer, meaning

[12] Even some of the most materialist thinkers challenge the assumption that causes themselves produce effects. For instance, in his work *History of Western Philosophy*, B. Russell writes, "[O]ur inclinations to accept that 'water grows the plant' is nothing but 'habit and association' because of perceived invariable succession." (New York: Routledge, 2004), 695.

when we ascribe partners in His creative activity and attributes. In the Quran, *Rabb* (Sustainer) is one of the most frequently used and important names of God. *Rabb*, which is translated as lord or sustainer, means the one who takes care of things and is in charge of maintaining their well-being. Oneness of *rububiya* or sustainership (*tawhid ar-rububiya)* is crucial because it means He alone is sufficient and capable of sustaining and taking care of everything, from things we think of as small, like water or a tree, to things that seem larger than life, like our personal struggles and aspirations. When we start parsing out the small affairs of His creation to seeming causes, we can no longer trace everything back to Him. The reasons behind things multiply and get scattered. We try to understand what factors lead to success or happiness, what circumstances cause our hardships, and we try to adjust those things, but there seem to be so many 'causes' affecting us, it becomes overwhelming. We get lost in the complexity, and we no longer know where to turn.

The question then arises, when faced with a calamity, some problem we have never before had to deal with, where *do* we turn? What do we put our faith in? It may be that we turn to whatever we believed was taking care of us before, whatever we have come to see as solid, reliable, powerful—maybe money, hard work, a good friendship, a relaxing pastime. By God's mercy and aid, these things may again provide the means of carrying us through our trial. But what if He is sending His aid through something else? If we think that one factor will take care of us, we will be overwhelmed one day if we find that it cannot. We may feel abandoned by our friend or frustrated that the best that our money can buy is not enough to resolve our ailments. But, if we can attain true *tawhid*, even as the apparent sources of relief shift, we can remain anchored as we will not lose sight of the one true source of sustenance and aid.

At this point, we can get crucial tips for how to attain genuine *tawhid* from the Quranic story of the Prophet Nuh (Noah), peace be upon him, and his son:

So [Nuh] said [unto his followers]: "Embark in this [ship]! In the name of God be its run and its riding at anchor! Behold, my Sustainer is indeed much-forgiving, much compassionate!"

And it moved on with them into waves that were like mountains. At that [moment] Nuh cried out to a son of his, who had kept himself aloof [from the others]: "O my dear son! Embark with us, and remain not with those who deny the truth!"

[But the son] answered: "I shall betake myself to a mountain that will protect me from the waters." [Nuh] Said: "Today there is no protection [for anyone] from God's judgment, save [for] those who have earned [His] mercy!" And a wave rose up between them, and [the son] was among those who were drowned.

(Quran, Hud, 11:41-43)

Nuh, peace be upon him, relies on God's protection and not on the ship itself. Although he does build a ship and climb aboard it, he is also aware that the ship itself is not his source of safety but that it embarks, rides, and anchors *by God's leave*. The son however, relies on the mountain *itself*. He believes it can protect him. He is unaware that even the seemingly solid mountain could crumble anytime if God did not will to sustain it. He is unaware that it is He who sustains everything in existence, and there is no sustainer except Him, no protector except Him. By seeking refuge in God, the Prophet Nuh remains protected from waves the size of mountains; but by thinking he can find safety on his own accord, his son cannot even be protected by a mountain itself. The case of the Prophet Nuh represents an example of genuine *tawhid*—he is aware that causes do not create anything and he uses them only in God's name—while the case of his son is an example of the superficial view that regards causes as creators of results.

An Awesome Injustice

> *Do not ascribe divine powers to aught beside God: for, behold, such [a false] ascribing of divinity (*shirk*) is indeed an awesome injustice!*
>
> (Quran, Luqman, 31:13)

The affirmation of divine oneness, *shahada*, attests that there is no deity worth worshipping except the One God. In Arabic *shahada* literally means testimony, certification, attestation. How is it possible to testify to this important declaration? By witnessing, through direct observation *(mushahada)*, the reality of *tawhid* in the world around us. In other words, *tawhid* is not merely a dogma; rather, it is a truth corroborated by the attestation of all of creation. *Tawhid* is a factual reality, and *shirk* does not do justice to this crucial reality of the world. *Shirk* is the delusion of the ungrateful who will not surrender to the reality of the world. This delusion itself leads to acute pain felt in the heart, mind, body, and soul of those who subscribe to it. They are caught in a struggle with reality, and so their lives fill with tension and dissonance. It is for this reason that in the Quran, *shirk* is described as constituting a crime or a sin that the sinner commits primarily against his own soul. So the Quran is warning us against *shirk* not because it is a sin placed arbitrarily just to test our loyalty or obedience, but because it leads to suffering in our lives. This suffering is real and inevitable with *shirk*, just because of the reality of how things are, how the universe is structured and how we have been designed.

Let's think of our everyday life. We rely on many things: food for energy, medicine or herbs for health, jobs for sustenance, people for love and connection and so on. We find ourselves putting our hopes in these things themselves: we hope our body is strong enough to accomplish our daily work and achieve future goals, we hope that a medicine will help alleviate our sickness, we hope that we are safe from accidents when we are on the road, we hope our friends are there for us when we need them, that our boss supports our promotion, that we do well in our projects, that we connect with nice people, and so on. When we go through life like this, we

in effect find ourselves dependent on—or even slaves to—many conditions and factors. It is as if we are constantly trying to make the world cooperate to fulfill our needs and yield what we want. And yet, these things we rely on are all weak and limited like us. Even the medicine that seems to hold the key to our wellbeing we find is just a poor chemical which does not know or care about us and sometimes even harms us. We realize our friends are just people with their own limits, with no time on their hands and their own share of worries. We find ourselves in the situation described by the Quran:

> *Do they indeed ascribe to Him as partners things that can create nothing, but are themselves created? No aid can they give them, nor can they aid themselves!*
>
> (Quran, A'raf, 7:191-192)

We are constantly begging things in creation to take care of us, to satisfy our desires and protect us from strife. But these things we rely on and put all our hopes in are weak. Yet we still place our hopes in them and direct our gratitude and praise to them, even though these things are often unable to fulfill our needs. In truth, these things cannot even know our needs. Moreover, our lives seem dependent on countless random factors that are beyond our control. We exhaust much of our energy in efforts to try to gain control over them and in the regret and worry that consume us when we recognize we cannot.

When we try to control things, everything seems to be out of control. Everything seems to be coming from all directions, and we cannot make sense of it. At that point it gets overwhelming, frightening, and dark. We then feel like orphans with no support, no grounding. It becomes very unsettling and painful, so we usually just switch off and disconnect even from ourselves. We don't want to think too much about our weaknesses because it is scary to realize just how vulnerable we are. We try to numb our pain or avoid it before we even understand it. But, because we don't understand it—because we don't know why it is here or where it came from—it does not go away. We may try to bury our anxiety and sorrows, but they stay with us, stirring beneath the surface.

This is why the Quran tells us that *shirk* generates suffering and injustice. Because, if we believe there are things that have power besides God—things which do not bear His qualities of being All-Wise, All-Merciful, and Most-Just—we are at their mercy. We have to try to please them. But what if they do not care about us or they have no compassion—what will happen? Life will be hard for us. As we think in this way, we may become overwhelmed with fears and worries because we believe that our well-being depends on so many indifferent, unwieldy, and merciless factors. Ultimately the trust we put in them is misplaced and groundless, for they do not have the power to really help us. Now imagine that we live our whole life this way and then one day we find out that all the things that we have feared really never had any power over us or our lives. Even sickness, even poverty, or rejection—they could not actually harm us, whether they actually happened or just loomed in an imagined future. How would we feel? We would have wronged ourselves, committed injustice primarily to ourselves, and suffered unnecessarily.

The Quran appropriately describes the futility of placing our hopes in things that cannot help us:

> *He to whom the dominion over the heavens and the earth belongs, and who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion: for it is He who creates everything and determines its nature in accordance with [His own] design. And yet, some have taken, besides Him, imaginary deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have no control to avert harm from, or bring benefit to themselves, and have no control over death, nor life, nor resurrection!*
>
> (Quran, Furqan, 25:2-3)

They have *no control to avert harm or bring benefit*. Yet, how much did we worry we might lose them, how much energy did we spend trying to attain them, how injured did we feel when they denied us, abandoned us, or remained indifferent? Again, in such a situation, we would have wronged ourselves and suffered unnecessarily. For years, probably for decades, we would have lived at the mercy of

those countless fears and false hopes. That is why God warns us and reminds us:

> *O humankind! Worship your Sustainer, who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you might remain conscious of Him who has made the earth a resting-place for you and the sky a canopy, and has sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits for your sustenance: do not, then, give God any compeers.*
>
> (Quran, Baqara, 2:21-22)

"Do not, then, give God any compeers." Do not think that 80% comes from God and 20% comes from food, rain, other people, yourself, or so on. Otherwise it means you are still attached to the things that have no power or benefit. Wherever the heart feels the sustenance is coming from, its love will go there. This is the worst injustice against ourselves: to be stuck in things themselves, unable to see beyond them. Being attached to the thing itself is a path leading to *shirk*, the only transgression that is hopeless, that is not forgiven.

> *Verily, God does not forgive the ascribing of divinity to aught beside Him (*shirk*), although He forgives any lesser sin unto whomever He wills: for he who ascribes divinity to aught beside God has indeed contrived an awesome sin.*
>
> (Quran, Nisa, 4:48)

God is the Most-Forgiving, which means not even the saintliest person forgives as readily or as fully as He does. Indeed, He promises to forgive even sins piling up to the sky and stretching over the entire expanse of earth. So then, why not forgive *shirk*? It is related in a *qudsi hadith*, an authentic saying of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, that God said,

> *O child of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O child of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O child of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the*

earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it. [Tirmidhi]

According to this *hadith*, God's forgiveness has but one condition: we must come to Him without *shirk*, that is, without ascribing any partners with Him. *Shirk* is unforgivable because it, by definition, is the only sin that withholds us from turning to God. We are turning elsewhere. We are looking to other things to help us. We are going the wrong direction. Even as God offers forgiveness, we keep moving away from it. His door remains open, but ours is closed.

I want to share with you the testimony of one of our Receiving Nur retreat participants. The topic of the retreat was "Finding Peace Through *Istighfar* [Asking for Forgiveness] and Praise" and as we were discussing how we remain closed to divine mercy when in a state of *shirk*, a participant expressed that for years the issue of *shirk* as the only unforgiveable sin had been a major stumbling block in her practice of *islam*. She used to wonder: how could the Most-Merciful harshly condemn so many just because they misinterpreted the nature of divinity? She then explained that at the retreat she began to see *shirk* in a different light: as a broader and much more relevant, intimate, and ongoing trial. She understood that *shirk* could be any attribution of power to other than God.

When we live in the delusion that things of this world *themselves*—whether our wealth, career, children, health, or even 'our own' abilities—provide us with what we need, we fall prey to countless ills such as ingratitude, envy, anger, arrogance, despair, and fear. We lose trust and reliance. We feel like life is a matter of surviving in a world of scarcity. In this way, when we place our hope in something other than God, we close the door to His mercy and guidance. It is not that somehow *shirk* offends God causing him to withhold His mercy. His door is always open to us, but we often close ours to Him. We turn away. When we deny His wisdom and mercy and focus our hope on what has no power to assist us, we become impenetrable, shrouded in our fears and anxieties, thus *unable* to benefit from any forgiveness, *unforgivable*. So, as with other sins outlined in the Qur'an, God explains the consequences

of *shirk*, not as arbitrary punishment, but as a description of how our souls operate so we can use this understanding to better harmonize our lives with the will of Our Creator, and thus abide in the peace of surrender to divine will and worshipping Him alone.

Let's remember that worship is not merely about prostrating before something and praying to it. Worship is a state of being, a belief and conviction about something that eventually translates into actions. When we are told in the Quran about people who worshipped idols, we may imagine them bowing down to some statues and expecting help from them, and we then conclude that we have no such practices and therefore we're immune to the potential of committing *shirk*. Such an assumption could not be further from the truth. If this issue of *tawhid* and *shirk* is one of the main teachings of the Quran, it must be a very serious issue that cannot be dismissed so lightly. When we take the time to reflect on the implications of *shirk* and what it means to worship entities other than God, we realize that potentially we can 'worship' anything that we believe is the source of power and perfection. Let's keep in mind, that this 'worship' is not used in the narrow conventional sense. Rather, worship is whatever we devote ourselves to, such as money, fame, success, etc. For instance, we worship money when we believe that it has the power to fulfill our hopes and heal our fears, or even that it is the gauge of our self-worth.

Another important and interesting point we may deduce from this is that worship is a primary purpose of the human being. We are told in the Qur'an that humankind (and *jinns*) were created only to worship God. Yet, when he is not fulfilling this purpose, when he is not worshipping God, man still worships, so the question is only: what does he worship? For everybody worships whether they worship God or something else.

The question is therefore not, 'shall we worship or not?' but rather 'who/what shall we worship?' From this perspective, *shirk* is not choosing–often unconsciously—to worship God alone and consequently ending up worshipping other entities beside Him, entities that do not have in them the power to help us or meet our

needs.[13] If we worship money, we will always want more of it in order to secure our basic existential needs, which we imagine are tied to how much money we have, and therefore we will feel that we never have enough and however wealthy we may be, we will feel needy. If we worship physical appearance and beauty, then it doesn't matter how good-looking we are, we will feel not good looking enough. And the fear of aging will always be lying in the background ready to seize us. But this is only a delusion, a mirage—beauty and money are not worth worshipping.[14] If we fall ill for example, we may be able to afford excellent treatment but still our money cannot guarantee us health nor buy us youth, nor

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[13] Thus, the Quran invites us to consciously choose to align our worship with what is true: "*Hence, set your face steadfastly towards the [true] faith, turning away from all that is false, and be not among those who ascribe partners to God. Thus, do not invoke, side by side with God, anything that can neither benefit you nor harm you: for, behold, if you do it, you will surely be among the wrongdoers! And [know that] if God should touch you with misfortune, there is none who could remove it save Him; and if He intends good for you, there is none who could turn away His bounty: He causes it to alight upon whomsoever He wills of His servants. And He alone is truly forgiving, most merciful. Say: 'O humankind! The truth from your Sustainer has now come unto you. Whoever, therefore, chooses to follow the right path, follows it but for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, goes but astray to his own hurt. And I am not responsible for your conduct.*" (Quran, Yunus, 10:105-108). "*And [neither will] they [who] worship, side by side with God, that which can neither harm nor benefit them, saying [to themselves], 'These are our intercessors with God!' Say: 'Do you [think that you could] inform God of anything in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above all that they associate with Him!'*" (Quran, Yunus, 10:18).

[14] "*But as for those who deny the truth, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty supposes to be water – until, when he approaches it, he finds that it was nothing: instead, he finds [that] God [has always been present] with him, and [that] He will pay him his account in full - for God is swift in reckoning!*" (Quran, Nur; 24:39) "*Say: 'Have you seen [i.e. considered] what you associate with God (shirk), [and] whom you invoke beside God? Show me what it is that they have created on earth - or do [you claim that] they have a share in [governing] the heavens?' Have We ever vouchsafed them a divine writ on which they could rely as evidence [in support of their views]? Nay, [the hope which] the wrongdoers hold out to one another [is] nothing but a delusion.*" (Quran, Fatir, 35:40)

'*Know that the life of this world is but a play and a passing delight, and a beautiful show, and [the cause of] your boastful vying with one another, and [of your] greed for more and more wealth and children. Its parable is that of [life-giving] rain: the herbage which it causes to grow delights the tillers of the soil; but then it withers, and thou canst see it turn yellow; and in the end it crumbles into dust. But [the abiding truth of man's condition will become fully apparent] in the life to come: [either] suffering severe, or God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance: for the life of this world is nothing but an enjoyment of self-delusion.*"
(Quran, Hadid, 57:20)

save us from death. [15] That is why *shirk* is the cause of so much suffering and pain. That is, the Quranic assertion that "*shirk* is an awesome wrong" (Quran, Luqman, 31:13) is not merely a 'moral' injunction but a factual statement. The rationale here is that *shirk* is the source of so much pain not because it is 'impious' or 'irreligious' but because it is at odds with the reality of life and the human condition. It is a delusion of the unconscious which is unaware that all power, goodness and perfection rest with God alone and all that exists belongs to Him alone.

> *God is the Creator of all things, and He alone has the power to determine the fate of all things. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth: and they who are bent on denying the truth of God's signs (ayaat) - it is they, they, who are the losers! Say: "Is it, then, something other than God that you bid me to worship, O you who are ignorant and unaware?"*
>
> (Quran, Zumar, 39:62-64)

Tawhid on the other hand is to worship only God, to whom alone belong the attributes of perfection (*al-asma al husna*) and who is therefore the sole source of all power, goodness and perfection.[16] *Tawhid* therefore is not some dogmatic 'metaphysical' claim but a

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[15] "*Unto Him [alone] is due all prayer aiming at the Ultimate Truth, since those whom people invoke instead of God cannot respond to them in any way - [so that he who invokes them is] but like one who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will reach his mouth, the while it never reaches him. Hence, the prayer of those who deny the truth amounts to no more than losing oneself in grievous error.*" (Quran, Ra'ad, 13:14)
"*He makes the night grow longer by shortening the day, and He makes the day grow longer by shortening the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]. Thus is God, your Sustainer: unto Him belongs all dominion - whereas those whom you invoke instead of Him do not own so much as the husk of a date-stone! If you invoke them, they do not hear your call; and even if they could hear, they would not be able to respond to you. And with all, on the Day of Resurrection they will utterly disown your having associated them with God. And none can make you understand [the truth] like the One who is all-aware.*" (Quran, Fatir, 35:13-14)

[16] "*He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! To him alone belong the attributes of perfection (al-asma' al-husna). All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!*" (Quran, Hashr, 59:24)

cosmic reality to which all creation testifies and that can be witnessed in the world.

Moreover, as the world testifies to the truth of the Quranic message, the Quran translates and converts the speech of these creational signs (*ayaat*) into a language that we can understand. That is, we need the Quran to understand how the world is bearing witness to *tawhid*. Imam Nursi aptly expressed the relationship between the Quran and the creation and our need for tuning to both: "[I]n order to describe His act to both eye and ear, the Maker describes His act while performing it: as a true artist, He unravels His art as He works it, and as a true Bestower of bounties He displays His blessings in the very act of bestowing."[17] In other words, God creates as He speaks and He speaks as He creates. Hence, we can neither understand existence without the speech of the Creator nor follow the Quran dogmatically, without observing the evidence and signs in the world. Thus, the Creator unites word and act through the verbal Qur'an (*al-qur'an al-tadwini*) and the cosmic Qur'an (*al-qur'ān al-takwini*) in one revelation.

Accordingly, the Quranic principle of *tawhid* expresses the living reality that all things, all beings indicate, which is that they all proceed from one single source of power and creativity; they are the artifacts of one single Maker, Giver of Life, Provider, Sustainer, etc. The conscious ones who witness this reality of *tawhid* in the world and within themselves will consciously worship the One God and shun away from worshipping anything else, that is, from *shirk*. They understand that when God warns us to stay away from *shirk*, He is offering generous and compassionate advice. He made us and knows us and wants to tell us very clearly what harms us and what is good for us, so we can align our lives accordingly. It is for this reason that the Qur'an explains how *tawhid* corresponds to the innate human disposition (*fitra*), to the actual reality of being:

> *And so, surrender your whole being to the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural*

[17] Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words* in *Risale-i- Nur Collection* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2002), 444.

> *disposition (fitra) which God has instilled into humans: for,' no change shall here be in what God has thus created: this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith; but most people know it not.*
>
> (Quran, Rum, 30:30)

Just as the behavior of molecules follow patterns in accordance with their given nature, our hearts and souls also follow patterns in accordance with their given nature—the *fitra* instilled by God. This will not change. Regardless of time, place, or circumstance, compassion and humility will purify and expand our hearts while envy and arrogance will corrupt them, making them grow dim and small, causing us and those around us misery. The purpose of the ever-true faith is to teach us how to understand the workings of our human selves that we might surrender fully, turning toward what is good for us and turning away from what is false and in discord with our given nature.

Shirk is the ultimate source of suffering as the Quran says, because believing our lives are at the mercy of countless other factors and powers—wondering whether they will favor or harm us—is in discord with our *fitra*. Even more, it deprives us of the guidance, understanding, and ease that come when we turn toward God as our Sustainer (*Rabb*), our one and only true sustainer and care-taker. *Shirk* is living in the world without any aim, without knowing why we are here, day in and day out. It is like going through a tunnel without knowing where it is taking us. We become lost in the world. We take things at their face value, invest our love in the passing, powerless trimmings of life, and in this way we squander the true, lasting gifts within the packages. If we live our life shrouded in *ghafla*, in heedlessness, unaware of *tawhid*, and caught in a web of *shirk*, when we reach the end of our life, we will say: "What happened?" Because at the end, whether we lived twenty years, forty years, eighty years or a hundred years, when it is over, it is over. Then it will dawn upon us that we wasted our whole life 'worshipping' what cannot benefit us nor harm us.[18] That realization

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[18] "*They worship beside God that which neither hurts them nor benefits them.*" (Quran, Yunus, 10:13)

will be so devastating that people "will bite their hands in despair."[19] But it would be too late to go back, "*hence, warn them of [the coming of] the Day of Regrets, when everything will have been decided- for as yet they are heedless, and they do not believe.*" (Quran, Maryam, 19:39)[20] Given such calamitous consequences of living in *ghafla* and *shirk*, it is our pressing task to relinquish the unconscious habits of *shirk* through

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"And yet, they worship, instead of God, that which can neither benefit them nor harm them: thus, he who denies the truth does indeed turn his back on his Sustainer!" (Quran, Furqan, 25:55)

"Said Abraham: 'Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit you in any way, nor harm you? Fire upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?'" (Quran, Anbiya, 21:66-67)

"And among people, there are many who worship God on the border line [of faith] so that if good befalls him, he is satisfied; but if a trial befalls him, he turns away utterly, losing [thereby both] this world and the life to come. This, indeed, is a loss beyond compare! [By behaving thus,] he invokes, instead of God, that which can neither harm nor benefit him: [and] this is indeed the utmost one can go astray [And sometimes] he invokes that whose harm is nearer than his benefit: evil, indeed, is such a patron and evil the follower!" (Quran, Hajj, 22:11-13)

"Thus, do not invoke, beside God, that which can neither benefit you nor harm you: for if you did, you will surely be among the wrongdoers!" (Quran, Yunus, 10:106)

[19] Quran, Furqan, 25:27

[20] *"[And God will say:] 'Were not My ayaat conveyed unto you, and were you [not] wont to give them the lie?' They will exclaim: 'O our Sustainer! Our bad luck has overwhelmed us, and so we went astray! O our Sustainer! Cause us to come out of this [suffering] - and then, if ever We revert [to sinning], may we truly be [deemed] evildoers!'"* (Quran, Mu'minun, 23:105-107)

"For one Day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say unto those who committed shirk: 'Where, now, are those beings whom you imagined to have a share in God's divinity?' Whereupon, in their utter confusion, they will only [be able to] say: 'By God, our Sustainer, we did not [mean to] to commit shirk!'" (Quran, An'am, 6:22-23)

"If you could see [them] when they will be made to stand before the fire and they will say, 'Oh, would that we were brought back [to life]: then, we would not give the lie to our Sustainer's ayaat, *but would be among the believers!' But -[they will say this only because] the truth which they used to conceal [from themselves] in the past will have become obvious to them; and if they were brought back [to life], they would return to the very thing which was forbidden to them: for behold, they are indeed liars!"* (Quran, An'am, 6:27-23)

"And when they who ascribe partners to God (shirk) behold those partners of theirs, they will exclaim: 'Our Sustainer! These are our partners to whom we used to invoke instead of Thee!' -whereupon [those partners] will fling from them: 'You are truly liars!' And on that Day, they will proffer their surrender to God; and all their false imagery will have forsaken them. For those who deny the truth and turn others away from the path of God, We will add suffering upon suffering in return for all the corruption that they wrought." (Quran, Nahl, 16:86-88)

the active, conscious confirmation of *tawhid* via the divine guidance of the Quran. We must live with that awareness while we still have the opportunity.

Opening…

In a state of *ghafla*, creation becomes a veil to our Creator. Seeming causes create a barrier blocking our connection to God. We may assert that He is one, and that He has no partner or like. This universe is His. But such a general affirmation amounts to superficial faith. For, by this affirmation we often merely mean that no one apart from Him could have created the universe and as such this conclusion is incomplete. To be sure, it may be the first step towards *tawhid*. Yet, it is still superficial *tawhid*—we still do not know who God is or what our relationship to Him is. Superficial *tawhid* is not sufficient to uncover the mysteries of who we are, what we are doing in this world, and whose guests we are. It may lead us to the threshold of the world of the unseen, but the door remains unopened. The key to this door lies within the Quranic message. If we follow divine guidance as it gives us cues for using our hearts and minds, the door will open up, and the journey toward truly witnessing divine unity—toward surrender, ease, and peace—will begin.

CHAPTER TWO

Signs *(ayaat)*: Beyond the Visible World

Genuine Tawhid & The Abode of Peace

When we take our belief in God for granted and simply claim "God is One. He has no partner. This Universe is his," without deeper reflection, we limit ourselves to superficial *tawhid*, a faith which serves more as an identity than a lived reality. God seems remote, and we cannot say with certainty in our hearts whether everything truly rests in His hands. We may say that everything happens according to His will and He is All-Merciful, yet—because we really feel we are living at the mercy of countless others—we still get stuck in worry and ingratitude. This is how heedlessness, *ghafla*, exposes us to *shirk* and the suffering that comes with it.

For this reason, the Quran pushes us to move beyond superficial *tawhid* and our unnecessary suffering toward genuine *tawhid* and the peace of surrender. However, we cannot believe in what we do not fully know. How can we *know* God? We come to know God by directly witnessing His Beautiful Names and attributes reflected by signs (*ayaat*) in the universe. This takes practice and contemplation. That is why genuine *tawhid*, believing in God alone by the testimony of all His creation is a conscious act. *Shahada* is a testimony that declares my seeing it. It cannot be just a claim because "I have seen it" means more than "I know it." It suggests, "I am sure of it, and my heart is at rest. It is at peace (*mutmain*)."

Think about our other relationships. How do we come to trust someone such as the new head of the company at work? We ask others whom we have reason to trust about him which gives us an initial idea of his character but not enough information to trust him fully. Then, we consider the facts of his life such as his previous work, his past and ongoing achievements, and if they match what we have heard about him, we begin to trust him a bit more. Eventually, if he works directly with us and proves to be just and fair, we trust him even more until finally, after years of building a

relationship, we develop a sense of knowing and trusting that person and thus a genuine willingness to follow his leadership and advice.

The same logic applies to our relationship with God. The Quran introduces us to the names and attributes of God and invites us to confirm them through observing His signs within ourselves and in the whole universe. Only after this observation and affirmation will we recognize that the favors we are blessed with such as food, water, air, safety, friendship, love, and life all come from Him, the one and only source of all blessings. Once we get to know Him through directly witnessing the testimony of His creation, we can trust Him fully, surrender to His will alone, be grateful to Him alone, worship him alone, which in turn will give us more opportunities to witness His power, wisdom and compassion in our specific circumstances. Ultimately, we reach a state in which we live in utter love of Him alone, in which we live in His presence. This is the state of genuine *tawhid*. Only with this *tawhid* do we do justice to the truth, and only with such complete *tawhid*, will we sail through life with surrender and peace. We will enjoy blessings in gratitude, withstand sorrows with patience by seeing messages from the One in them, and reap eternal harvest from this finite world. In this chapter, we shall see how Quranic guidance is truthful and invites us to this abode of peace (*dar al-salām*):

> *The parable of the life of this world is but that of rain which We send down from the sky, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth whereof men and animals draw nourishment, until -when the earth has assumed its artful adornment and has been embellished, and they who dwell on it believe that they have gained mastery over it -there comes down upon it Our judgment, by night or by day, and We cause it to become [like] a field mown down, as if there had been no yesterday. Thus clearly do We spell out these signs (ayaat) unto people who reflect!*
>
> *And know that God invites human beings unto the abode of peace* (dar al-salam), *and guides him that wills to be guided onto a straight path.*
>
> (Quran, Yunus, 10:24-25)

Bearing Witness: Signs for those who reflect

Seeing the world in and around us as filled with signs transforms creation from a veil blocking our awareness of God into a window opening us to His light. Rather than getting stuck in the things of this world themselves, everything around us becomes a means of constant connection to our Sustainer. Let's remember our earlier reflection: When we wake up and it is raining, what are our first thoughts? When we see the rain as merely rain—something matter-of-fact, maybe a little annoying, something we simply attribute to winds and storm fronts—we block ourselves from its deeper meaning and true reality.

There is an interesting *hadith* related to this issue:

> It is related that the messenger of God (peace be upon him) led dawn prayer at Hudaybiya after a rainy night. On completion of the prayer, he faced the people and said, "Do you know what your Lord has revealed?" The people replied, "God and His messenger know better." He said, "God has said, 'In this morning some of my worshippers remained as believers and some became non-believers; whoever said that the rain was due to the blessings and the mercy of God is a believer in Me and he is a disbeliever in the stars, and whoever said that it rained because of a particular star is a disbeliever in Me and a believer in the stars.'"[21]

This hadith draws attention to the fact that whatever the apparent causes of a phenomenon such as rain, it is God who is the Dispenser of all causes. Furthermore, God doesn't just say believers will attribute the rain to Him but to His "blessings and mercy." That is, for those who were in a state of belief, by recognizing that the rain came from God, it became for them a reminder of His mercy and blessings, and thus, an affirmation of His Beautiful Names such as the Merciful Bestower of Blessings.

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[21] Sahih al-Bukhari, narrated by Zaid bin Khalid Al-Juhani, hadith 148, under "Invoking Allah for Rain (*Istisqaa*)" and Hadith 807 under "Characteristics of Prayer."

For the others, thinking that a star, perhaps due to its position in the sky, was the ultimate cause of the rain blocked their ability to see the purposeful blessings therein and could not therefore be grateful to their Sustainer alone. When we do not observe the creative activities in the creation as signs indicating God's beautiful attributes, the door remains open to *shirk*; and when we fall into *shirk*, we 'become non-believers' in that particular instance as it is highlighted in the above hadith. That is, we associate power and other attributes of perfection to entities other than God when we suppose that effects are the work of seeming causes, that, for instance, a particular star or weather pattern caused the rain. The Quran warns us about the connection between being heedless of the signs in creation and committing *shirk*:

> *And how many a sign (ayah) is there in the heavens and on earth which they pass by [unthinkingly], and on which they turn their backs! And most of them do not believe in God without ascribing divine powers to other beings beside Him [without committing shirk].*
>
> (Quran, Yusuf, 12:105-106)

Signs are the key here. Ignoring them puts us among the heedless and exposes us to *shirk*, but reflecting upon them, using our reason to understand them, and remembering God through them leads to genuine belief and brings peace to our hearts. Indeed, the Quran repeatedly calls us to *reflect*, *think*, *reason*, and *remember*. When we reflect on the creation as we are instructed in the Quran, and reason beyond the initial appearance of things, then the "veil" of creation is lifted. In other words, things of this world will no longer block our awareness of God but will instead become signs pointing to Him and making Him known with His Beautiful Names (*al-asma' al-husna*). For those who reflect, everything around them—the rain, plants, crops and food, the sun and moon—become signs that testify to the oneness of their Maker and Sustainer (*Rabb*):

> *It is He who sends down water from the skies; you drink thereof, and thereof [drink] the plants upon which you pasture your animals;*

By virtue thereof He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date palms, and grapes, and all [other] kinds of fruit: in this, behold, there is a sign (ayah) indeed for people who reflect.

And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command: in this, behold, there are signs (ayaat) indeed for people who use their reason!

And all the [beauty of] many hues-which He has created for you on earth: in this, behold, there is a sign (ayah) for people who remember!

For, should you try to count God's blessings, you could never compute them! Behold, God is indeed much-forgiving, most merciful…

(Quran, Nahl, 16: 10-18)

God brings our attention to those very things that we pass by unthinkingly every day: the sun we see on rising, the stars in the night sky, the vast array of foods we eat, the water that we, along with plants and animals, drink and benefit from, and even all the beautiful colors of the Earth. When we reflect on them as signs, we will realize everything comes with countless blessings that point to a Most-Merciful Sustainer of all.

Seeing Water in a New Light

Reflecting takes us deeper than a quick reminder that "This all comes from God." Reflecting and reasoning means we contemplate all the implications of such a reminder until we have affirmed its truth in our lives and it has changed how we experience the world. Let's return to the example of water to see how learning to see and reflect on the *ayaat* brings us closer to God.

We were considering a seemingly simple question: Does water make plants grow? At first, it seems matter-of-fact that water gives life to plants. We assume this because we are steeped in the

mindset of superficial *tawhid* and have grown used to thinking of things happening due to seeming causes. However, reflecting further, we recognize that water, having no knowledge, wisdom, power, or even life of its own, does not possess the qualities necessary to give life. We then also consider how two things happening consecutively does not necessarily mean one causes the other. Just as the switch on our television is one of many conditions set up to project a picture, so too water is just one of many conditions by which a plant grows.

Now let's take this further. The relationship between water and the plant is not only between the water and the plant. Water is only a small part of a complex system of soil and air, as well the right amount of sunlight and the appropriate season. So, does this mean we can just add up a longer list of things to find out all of the causes that make a plant grow? Well, the sunlight and seasons themselves are tied to the distance of the Earth from the sun, its revolution around it, and its rotation about itself. The composition of the soil and air comes from the material of ancient stars and all the processes by which new stars and planets later formed. The deeper we look, the more we realize that, in fact, the entire cosmos needs to be here, just as it is now, in order for a single plant to grow.

In order for water to truly give life to the plant, it would need to be in control of all of those factors: the sunlight, air, and earth, the laws of chemistry and physics, the seasons, the solar system, and so on. But water does not have the power or knowledge required to do this. So, if one element (water) is not able to subjugate or coordinate the others, all these intricately interconnected causes would have to know each other and cooperate together to make a plant grow, which could not happen as a conscious act. So, by what consciousness do they move and interact so purposely? They must all be acting *in the name of*, i.e. with the power of, an All-Knowing One, a Most Powerful Giver of Life who alone can infuse life into plants and other living beings and make them grow.

So we see, because all beings and events are interrelated, in order for one being, one particle, or one event to come into existence, the entire cosmos has to exist in the first place. Therefore, the creator of one thing (however tiny it may seem to us) can only be

the Creator of the whole universe. No single being or event exists on its own. Each exists in interconnectedness with everything else; each is part of the *inseparable* whole. Hence, the maker of one can only be the Maker of All. That is why the Quran says,

> *[For Him,] the creation of you all and the resurrection of you all is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul.*
>
> (Quran, Luqman, 31:28)

> *Behold, God does not disdain to present an example - that of a mosquito or what is smaller than it.*
>
> (Quran, Baqara, 2:26)

Whether a single soul or a small insect, all beings testify to the truth that God alone is capable of orchestrating this universe to bring about any and every intricate being. When we consider all of the conditions connected to even a mosquito's birth and sustenance, we realize no example is actually "small." Indeed, God says, He does not disdain to present this example. For, only the One who can create the universe, comprised of so many unique, complex, and interconnected beings and elements, can create a small mosquito.

Interconnectedness may deceive the heedless, inducing them to suppose that natural factors themselves produce the events and things of the world. Yet, this same interconnectedness points to the fact that particular causes and their apparent effects are actually *created together*. The relationship between what we usually call cause and effect simply reflects a precise and elegant ordering. And so, all the consistent happenings throughout the universe point to the Orderer, that is, the One who creates with order and blessings:

> *Alif. Lam. Mim. Ra. These are signs (ayaat) of the book and what has been bestowed upon you from on high by your Sustainer (Rabb) is the truth-yet most people will not believe?*
>
> *Who has raised the heavens without any supports that you could see, and is established on the throne of His almightiness; and He*

[it is who] has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]. He governs all that exists. Clearly He spells out these signs (ayaat), so that you might be certain that you are destined to meet your Sustainer [on Judgment Day].

And it is He who has spread the earth wide and placed on it firm mountains and running waters, and created thereon two sexes of every [kind of] plant; [and it is He who] causes the night to cover the day. Verily, in all this there are ayaat indeed for people who reflect!

And there are on earth [many] tracts of land close by one another [and yet widely differing from one another]; and [there are on it] vineyards, and fields of grain, and date-palms growing in clusters from one root or standing alone, [all] watered with the same water: and yet, some of them have We favored above others by way of the food [which they provide for humans and animals]. Verily, in all this there are ayaat indeed for people who use their reason!

(Quran, Ra'd, 13:1-4)

If we open up ourselves to Quranic cues and reflect more carefully we can see how the interconnectedness, diversity, and abundance of creation all are signs pointing to many of the Beautiful Names of God, *al-asma al-husna*, including, for instance: the Orderer, the Sustainer, the Powerful, the Merciful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, the Giver of Life, the All-Encompassing, the Fashioner, the All-Aware, the All-Wise, the Compeller, the Subtle, and the Beautiful One.

Returning to our original question, we can now see that it is not water giving life to the plant or making it grow, but rather, it is God creating the plant and water (and soil, sun, and so on) together. Water is but a means by which God creates. Throughout the Quran, God tells us exactly that:

He it is Who sends down waters from the sky: and by this means We bring forth various kinds of plants.

(Quran, Ta Ha, 20:53)

And We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and cause thereby gardens to grow, and fields of grain.

(Quran, Qaf, 50:9)

Nay - who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies? For it is by this means that We cause gardens of shining beauty to grow - [whereas] it is not in your power to cause [even one single of] its trees to grow! Could there be any divine power besides God? Nay, they [who think so] are people who swerve [from the straight path].

(Quran, Naml, 27:60)

So, the fact that water has no life but a living plant grows through it indicates a source of life beyond both the water and the plant. If we let ourselves grow accustomed to thinking water is responsible for giving life to plants, then we also find ourselves thinking that we too somehow cause them to grow, through our care and tending. But God reminds us in the above verse that causing plants to grow is not in our power. We too are created beings, rich in blessings, sent as a means through which the Creator gives, shapes, and sustains life. We cannot give life to ourselves or to a plant. Likewise, a plant itself cannot be the source of life because it is going to die whenever it is deprived of water or sunlight, so the life in the plant does not belong to it. The plant is merely *a* mirror reflecting the life that is given to it through water. The Quran describes that God "made from water every living thing" (Quran, Anbiya, 21:30). Indeed, none of the seeming causes in creation can themselves be sources of life, power, beauty, and so on; they merely reflect those qualities of the One.

There is a tale of Mulla Nasruddin (known as Juha in Arabic) that points to this reality with witty wisdom. One day he comes to a café and tells the people there that the moon is actually more useful

than the sun. They ask him why, and he explains that we need the light more at night when it's dark! Nasruddin's reasoning may sound ridiculous but don't we often act as though "the moons" in our lives are more important than "the sun" that is the source of their light? Don't we forget that the light they reflect is not their own and when it is dark at night, it is only because the sun is hidden? Sometimes we are awake, clearly seeing that the one source of everything is God, but at 'night' when we forget about God, we see lifeless water, for instance, as a source of life when actually it just reflects the Life Giver (*muhyi*) and Ever-Living (*hayy*) Creator. By claiming that the moon is more useful, Nasreddin reveals this common delusion and invites us to reflect on the relationship between The Creator and the created beings, which merely reflect the qualities of their source rather than possessing those qualities themselves. When we say there is no deity except God: "*La ilaha illa allah*," we mean that there is no giver of life except God; there is no source of compassion other than God. My friends, for example, are only reflecting the compassion of their Creator. There is no bestower except God. When a tree gives me fruits, they are given to me in the name of the Bestower. When I cook delicious food, it is His blessing, not me doing something on my own. In other words, the moon never shines without the sun!

When I look around with this consciousness, then I start seeing the world in a different light. Creation is no longer a veil to divine creativity leading me to ask questions such as: Is it God or is it water? It is not about God versus water. Nor is it about God and water together as co-creators. It is about water being a sign, an *ayah* indicating God. God is not some unknown entity. God is living and ever present not only in the heavens but here on Earth. As the Quran puts it beautifully, "*For it is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth, and that He alone is truly wise, all-knowing*" (Quran, Zukhruf, 43:84). His attributes are reflected in all of creation, revealing to the perceptive that "*God—there is no deity except Him; to Him alone belong the attributes of perfection* [the Beautiful Names or *al-asma' al-husna*]" (Quran, Ta-Ha, 20:8).

Because water, sunlight, and air have none of the qualities needed to grow a plant, they are simply signs (*ayaat*) indicating a source beyond all of them, a source of power, knowledge, sustenance,

wisdom and all the qualities needed to grow a plant. That is who God is. This reflection on water and its interaction with a plant is an example of seeing and witnessing (*shahada*) the signs of God, and thus confirming the testimony of His Existence and His Qualities through the signs in the universe. As we are taught in the Quran, everything is an *ayah* indicating something other than itself and beyond itself; and what they are pointing to is God with all His qualities of perfection, with all His Beautiful Names.

Alif. Lam. Mim: Seeing the World Anew with the Quran

Alif. Lam. Mim. Those are signs (ayaat)…[22]

Many chapters (*sura*) of the Quran start with such mysterious disconnected letters like *Alif. Lam. Mim,* i.e. A. L. M.[23] They are actually known as disjointed letters, *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a* or simply as *al-muqatta'at.* Many opinions have been advanced as to the meaning of these letters but they all remain speculative. Among the many possible meanings that these letters may signify, one thing is certain however: they are *ayaat. Alif. Lam. Mim* for instance is the first *ayah* of chapter 31, *Luqman.* Clearly these disconnected letters are signs in the sense that they have no significance in themselves. That is, they embody the function and meaning of 'sign' in an explicit way. Let's consider the simple example of a signpost. It has some physicality but it is not meant to be an obstacle or a veil to the signified message. Its purpose is to point you in the right direction.

For instance, when we hear *Alif. Lam. Mim* and we are baffled and cannot fathom their meaning, we are forced to slow down and

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[22] "*Alif. Lam. Mim.*" (Quran, Luqman, 31:1) *"Those are signs (ayaat) of the divine book, full of wisdom."* (Quran, Luqman, 31:2). See also Quran: 28:1-2, 10:1, 12:1, 13:1, 15:1 and 27:1.

[23] Exactly twenty-nine chapters, which is about one fourth of the 114 Qur'anic *suras* begin with such disjointed letters. Out of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet (not counting the *hamza*), one half i.e. fourteen occur in this position. These are *Alif, Lam, Mim, Ha, Ra, Kaf, Ha, Ya, Ayn, Sin, Qaf, Sad, Ta* and *Nun.* These letters may appear alone or in combination with other letters in groups of two, three, four, or five letters, totaling 29 combinations.

pause. In other words, the spelling out of these letters is such an unusual form of speech that it interrupts our habitual way of taking words for granted. It is like an invitation to reflect on what an *ayah* means. It is as though we are being shaken in order to draw our attention to something different and remarkable. It suddenly dawns upon us that we are limited beings with limited knowledge and resources and that so many things lie beyond our reach. As we become aware of our limitedness, we realize how much we are in need of guidance and wisdom. Thus, by opening a Quranic chapter with such unusual speech - *Alif. Lam. Mim*- we are shaken out of our illusion of knowing. For in our heedlessness (*ghafla*), we often surmise that we can just read the words, understand the literal meaning and study their semantics et voila, we have figured out the meaning of the *ayaat* of the Quran!

However, signs have two components: a signifier and a signified. Take the example of linguistic signs or words: a word such as 'apple' is the signifier. It indicates the signified, which is a physical thing out there in the world. When I say "*elma*" (apple in Turkish), does it remind you of anything? How about "*tuffaha*" (apple in Arabic)? Though they all look and sound different—*apple*, *elma*, *tuffaha*—they in fact point to the same thing. Language is a system of signs. These words sound different because they come from different languages, but they mean the same thing. The physical apple is the point of reference. The point of reference is the signified and it is what really matters, because that is what the signifier was devised for. If apples did not exist, we would not have a word for them. We did not have the word computer before it existed. A sign points to something beyond itself. *Apple* or *elma* or *tuffaha* all signify an apple out there, something beyond these sounds and letters.

Now what does all this tell us about Quranic *ayaat*? They too have two components: the literal meaning is the signifier that indicates the signified meanings, which are revealed unto the hearts of those who listen and seek divine guidance. Hence, understanding the literal meaning of Quranic *ayaat* is necessary but not sufficient. The next step consists of listening to the Quran as God's speech through which He reveals to us Himself and His purposes in creation. Then we realize how we are taught to know God with

His attributes of perfection so that we may love and worship Him alone. Thus starts a process of purification of the soul from the delusions of *shirk*, which makes it more receptive to the disclosure of the revelation. Thus, through reflection (*tafakkur*), contemplation (*tadabbur*) and worship (*'ibada*) we prepare ourselves to receive the revealed signified meanings. Often, the verbal Quranic *ayaat* refer to beings, events and creational activity in the world as non-verbal *ayaat*, signs. For instance, the Quran tells us that fruit and therefore the apple itself (not the word, but the actual apple) is an *ayah*. Before it was our landing point, the physical apple was the point of reference for our human language. Now the Quran tells us that the physical apple is itself a sign indicating something else. In itself, on its own it has no meaning.

Here I am looking at an apple. What does it mean to me? If I am hungry it is food. What else? *Mmm*, it smells and tastes good. It gives me joy and pleasure. Apart from being food, it also looks nice in its shape and color. It may also mean more to me because of some memories I associate with it. But first I think about it simply as food because that is the primary need it fulfills for me. If I did not have need for it, the apple wouldn't be food for me. So the apple itself together with my need for sustenance makes it food. In the same way, the apple together with my need to feel good makes it a pleasure. Also, the apple along with my need to remember loved ones makes it serve as a memory. The apple together with my need for beauty makes it beautiful. All the meanings we ascribe to the apple are relational.

That is, the apple is meaningful to me through my needs. They connect me to the apple. It is through them that I can read the apple as a meaningful sign. If it is food then I can ask, "Who is sending me this food, who is feeding me with this 'apple'?" If it is sustenance, I ask, "Who is the sustainer behind this?" If it tastes good: who is the One taking care of me such that He attends to my pleasure and joy just as He satisfies my physical needs? If it is beautiful: who is the Source of this art and beauty? The apple indicates something beyond itself. So just like the words *apple*, *elma*, and *tuffaha* in themselves have meaning only because they refer to something out in the world, the Quran teaches us that the physical apple that we eat is just like that word, it is an *ayah*, a symbol that

has meaning only because it refers to something *beyond*. When we interact with it with this understanding, we can start deciphering and reading it.

To give yet another example, on my way to Charlottesville, when I see a signpost "To Charlottesville," do I stop there and say this is Charlottesville? Of course, I don't. Because it is just a signpost; it is showing me the way to Charlottesville. Quranic units or verses are also signs, *ayaat*. They point us in the right direction, but we have to actually follow that direction if we want to reach our destination. Consider this *ayah* from the Quran:

> *Then let the human being consider his sustenance. For that We pour forth water in abundance. And We split the earth into fragments. And We produce therein corn, and grapes and nutritious plants, and olives and dates, and enclosed gardens, dense with lofty trees, and fruits and fodder, for use and convenience to you and your cattle.*
>
> (Quran, 'Abasa, 80:24-32)

Let's say I am eating and suddenly I remember this *ayah*: *"Then let the human being consider his sustenance."* If I do not pause to consider my sustenance, it means I saw the *ayah*, but I have not taken it seriously. It is like I have a treasure map, but I do not follow it. I say that I have the Quran, the best guide, the word of God, but unless I read and perform it, it is not the Quran yet for me; it is not guidance for me. It is only a codex (*mushaf*), the paper and script. Unless I follow the map, am I going to find the treasure? Just because I have the map to the treasure does not make me wealthy. Similarly, every *ayah* in the Quran is a navigational tool. So, we should stop our heedless attitude and follow it…

The above *ayaat* (80:24-32) ask us to consider that gardens filled with our sustenance are produced by God for our "use and convenience."[24] In other words, our Sustainer draws our attention

[24] Consider also: "*He it is who has caused water to come down from the sky; and by this means have We brought forth all living growth, and out of this have We brought forth green blade, from which We bring forth the thick clustered grain; and out of the date palm, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of grapes, and the olive and the pomegranate: [all] so alike,*

to the purpose, wisdom, knowledge, and power behind these processes. And there is also care and compassion in them. I am here with food. If I think that the food is coming from the soil, water and sun, I should ask: do they have any purpose, knowledge, power, care, and compassion? You put a seed in the earth and something starts growing. Does earth have life? It does not have life, but all living things are coming out of it. It does not have compassion, it cannot follow a purpose. So the Quran helps us see clearly that the soil, sunlight, and water are all acting in the name of another who has knowledge, power, and compassion. They are all used for a purpose: they are *ayaat*, signs. If I start reading them, just as I read the apple, I will see that water for instance is a sign to compassion and mercy, *rahma*. Water is like embodied *rahma*. Rain does not just fall from clouds as we learn at school but it is *sent* as mercy and grace (*rahma)* by the Merciful and Compassionate (*al-Rahman).*[25]

Only the One who controls all things can take care of me. I have a need for food, and then food comes, and this food works perfectly in my body. Whoever made the food knows me and my anatomy. Look at food; food comes from the earth. It needs rain, soil, air, sun, the rotation of the Earth, all the laws of physics, all the laws of chemistry, and so on. So for one fruit, one apple, for instance, to be, the whole universe has to exist. Because we buy it for just fifty cents, we do not think about its connection to the rest of the world. And that is why the Quran gives us an *ayah*, a sign, saying: Stop. Consider. Because it is not something obvious. It looks like just a small apple yet it is the sign to the Maker and Sustainer of all

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and yet so different! Look upon their fruit when it comes to fruition and ripens! Verily, in all this there are signs (ayaat) indeed for people who believe!" (Quran, An'am, 6:99)

[25] The following *ayaat* is also relevant here: "*And He it is who sends forth the winds as a glad tiding of His coming mercy* (rahma)*-so that, when they have brought heavy clouds, We may drive them towards dead land and cause thereby water to descend; and by this means do We cause all manner of fruit to come forth. Even thus shall We cause the dead to come forth: [and this] you ought to keep in mind.*" (Quran, 7:57) "*And He it is who sends forth the winds as a glad tiding of His coming grace and mercy* (rahma)*; and [thus, too,] We cause pure water to descend from the skies.*" (Quran, 25:48) "*And it is He who sends down rain after [people] have lost all hope, and unfolds His grace and mercy* (rahma) *[thereby] for He alone is [their] Protector, the One to whom all praise is due.*" (Quran, 42:28)

worlds (*Rabbu al-alameen*). Here the Quran compassionately guides us to reflect. It says think: for that piece of food to be on your plate, the whole world must be in place. So whoever made this must be the maker of all of it!

Whoever we identify as the sender, our gratitude will go there. When a friend sends us a present brought to us by a delivery man, are we grateful to the delivery man? We just say thank you to him for making the delivery, but our gratitude for the gift is directed to our friend. Everything in this world is like a delivery man, a messenger. Messages do not always have to be verbal. They can be in the form of a feeling for instance. If you like apples very much and you are very hungry; when you eat an apple, you feel good. What does that feeling have to do with the physical matter of the apple? Do you think it is just the flesh and body that is responding to it? No, it is the soul and heart. Something else is sent through the apple. You are eating something physical, but the result is a feeling. Those feelings have a meaning. A meaning that takes you to the Beautiful Names of God.

If the apple itself gives you pleasure, then more apples should mean more pleasure. But that does not happen. The more you eat the same food, the less you want it. Why? Because the pleasure is not *in* the apple but between the apple and your need for it—the blessings lie within the interconnectedness, the way we have been created in togetherness, with mercy, meaning, and purpose. Our need is the key for reading the *ayaat*.

Remember apple trees and all other plants for that matter do not grow on their own; rather, they grow with the heavens and the earth. God "pours forth water" and "splits the earth in fragments" to provide them for you and for me for our "use and convenience." There is a purpose in their being sent. They are not growing haphazardly. They fulfill our needs, providing food and other benefits. Without them there would be no life on earth. Water does not have that knowledge. It does not have compassion for us; it does not think about our needs. What is more, the Quran says:

"[B]y this [water] we cause gardens of shining beauty [to grow]."[26] This means, these gardens of plants do not only provide many vital resources, but they are beautiful with their various shades of green, elegant flowers, and bright, diversely-shaped fruits. Even if we assumed that water played a functional role in the growing of plants, how does all this beauty and art emerge? Indeed, the plants throughout the Earth really speak to all our needs, satisfying our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls. When we see how these plants satisfy our needs, we can see beyond them to their sender: The Compassionate Provider, Our Generous Sustainer and Host.

We tend to think that physical things are the fundamental reality. No. If someone who knew no language came from another planet and stumbled upon some writing and then he started analyzing it by measuring the angles between the lines of letters and studying the chemical composition of the ink on the paper, wouldn't we laugh? We would say he is wasting his time. Those are just words on paper, you will not understand their meaning by measuring the letters or knowing their chemical composition. They are there to be *read*. Their physicality is not the reality; it is not what matters. So it is with physical things and events. They are signs pointing to different qualities of God based on their interaction with my needs. So just like the point of reference for the word "apple" is the physical apple, the points of reference of the physical apple are the beautiful attributes of God, *asma-ul husna*. If it is food, then it is a symbol of sustenance, pointing to the Sustainer. If it is beautiful, then it is a symbol pointing to the source of Beauty.

His Beautiful Names

God is the one who creates sustenance for me and satisfies my hunger. Through an apple, through water, through all that I interact with, I come to understand that God is my Sustainer (*Rabb*), who is taking care of me, that He is the Provider. Then,

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[26] *Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies? For it is by this means that We cause gardens of shining beauty to grow - [whereas] it is not in your power to cause [even one of] its trees to grow! Could there be any divine power besides God? Nay, they [who think so] are people who swerve [from the path of reason].* (Quran, Naml, 27:60)

what I call Him is not important. We can say Allah, we can say God, or we can say Dieu. At the end of the day, what matters is whether we recognize His attributes and that the most Beautiful Names belong to Him alone as we are told in the Quran, "*Invoke God, or invoke the Most Gracious: by whichever name you invoke Him, He is always the One—for! His are all the attributes of perfection (beautiful names).*" (Quran, Isra, 17:110) That is what *tawhid* is about. Who is the provider? Who is the giver of life? Who is making living beings grow and flourish? Who is taking care of my sustenance? Who is controlling everything? Who has power over everything? Is it water, plants, the sun, and so on? Or is it the Creator of them all? Water, soil, the food for animals and people, and other seeming causes involved in the maintenance of life all indicate in their limited nature that beyond themselves there is one and only one source of provision, sustenance, power, only one who possesses all the qualities manifested in the order and blessings of the universe.

The Qur'an speaks of the universe in order to make known God with His Attributes and Names. It explains the meanings of the "book of the universe" to make known its Creator, so as we read and reflect, God no longer seems remote. We see evidence, signs, of Him all around us. The Quran instructs us how to understand these signs of creation. It teaches us how to look at beings and events, each like a meaningful word bearing the meaning of another, and to look at them on account of their Maker. In other words, the Qur'an and its students speak of the universe in God's name.

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise.*
>
> (Quran, Hashr, 59:1)

> *He is God – the Creator, the Maker, the Giver of Form. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him. He is the Almighty, the All-Wise.*
>
> (Quran, Hashr, 59:24)

Surat-al-Hashr (Quran, 59) starts with verses stating that all things in the heavens and on earth praise and glorify God for He is the Exalted and the Almighty One. It starts and ends like this and in between it tells us how they exalt. Water, not having life itself, not having any power or knowledge, but being involved in something that requires the knowledge of the whole cosmos and all the laws of chemistry and physics, acts perfectly without hesitation in all plants, humans, animals, and molecules. In this way, it glorifies and declares the perfection and complete knowledge and wisdom of whoever is employing it. In other words, the way it is created and employed in interconnection with the whole creation testifies that whoever is using water this way knows everything, has compassion over everything, and provides for everything just exactly as the Quran tells us.

Islam means to surrender to this reality and consequently to make peace with ourselves, and with everyone and everything else in the universe. When we don't know God as the one to whom all the most Beautiful Names (*al-asma' al-husna)* belong, we cannot trust His wisdom and compassion and surrender to His will in peace and joy. How do we make peace with the world when we do not see that everything in the universe is interconnected and meaningful? How can we make peace with ourselves, when we do not know how our needs and their satisfaction are a testimony to our Generous Sustainer? How can we surrender to this reality and embrace our humanity, if we do not know that we are all coming from the One with infinite knowledge, compassion, generosity, wisdom, and justice? That is why the Quran describes those who err in belief in God as those who are mistaken regarding the beautiful attributes of God and who therefore distort their meaning by applying them to created things and beings, "*And to God [alone] belong the attributes of perfection (the beautiful names); invoke Him, then, by these, and stand away from all who distort the meaning of His attributes.*" (Quran, A'raf, 7:180) That is why God says in *Sura Taha* "*God. There is no deity except Him. To Him alone belong the attributes of perfection.*" (Quran, 20:8)

This *ayah* suggests that all the names of perfection, everything we value in this life belong to Him. There is a neat equation here. There is nothing worth worshipping, adoring, giving value to, or

fearing but Him. How do we know this? Because all those beautiful qualities worthy of worship belong to Him and to nothing else. So when we see beauty or order and feel inspired to praise it, that praise belongs to Him.[27] When we get to this reality and we are satisfied with it, that is *tawhid*. When we live with awareness of God's Beautiful Names such as the All-Knowing, All-Wise, All-Powerful, Most-Compassionate, Provider, Sustainer, Healer, Most-Just, and Peace, only then can we genuinely believe and fully surrender.

[27] *Unto God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Verily, God alone is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due!* (Quran, Luqman, 31:26)

CHAPTER THREE

Living True *Tawhid*: The Peace of Surrender

Seeing the *Ayaat*, Believing in *Tawhid*

I want to dwell on how our daily life is affected with how we interact (or don't interact) with the creational signs *(al-ayaat al-takwiniya)*. Why does God repeat in the Quran again and again that everything out there in creation is an *ayah* i.e. a *sign* indicating meanings beyond themselves: the sun, the moon and their orbits, the succession of night and day, and mountains and rivers, and the creation of beings in pairs (male and female)?[28] Repetition indicates importance. We repeat things that fulfill our most fundamental needs. For instance, we repeatedly eat and drink, and we never get bored of it because as the need is constantly renewed, fulfilling the need is pleasurable. Breathing is something we do again and again without complaining. Actually, not being able to breath would

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28 *"It is God who has raised the heavens without any supports that you could see, and is established on the throne of His almightiness; and He [it is who] has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]. He governs all that exists. Clearly does He spell out these* ayaat, *so that you might be certain in your innermost that you are destined to meet your Sustainer."* (Quran, Ra'd, 13:2) "*And it is He who has spread the earth wide and placed on it firm mountains and running waters, and created thereon two sexes of every [kind of] plant; [and it is He who] causes the night to cover the day. Verily, in all this there are* ayaat *indeed for people who reflect!"* (Quran, Ra'd, 13:3) "*And there are on earth [many] tracts of land close by one another [and yet widely differing from one another]; and [there are on it] vineyards, and fields of grain, and date-palms growing in clusters from one root or standing alone, [all] watered with the same water: and yet, some of them have We favored above others by way of the food [which they provide for man and beast . Verily, in all this there are* ayaat *indeed for people who use their reason!"* (Quran, Ra'd, 13:4) "*And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this, behold, there are* ayaat *indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge!"* (Quran, Rum, 30:22) "*Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon, and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: 'in all this' there are* ayaat *indeed for people who use their reason."* (Quran, Ra'd, 2:164)

cause us much distress and if prolonged would lead to death. So, what need do we have of knowing that everything is an *ayah*, a sign? What human need does this 'fact' that everything is an *ayah* fulfill? What happens when we don't live as though everything is *ayaat*? What do we miss?

We have been reflecting on the meaning of *tawhid*, and how genuine *tawhid* as it is taught to us in the Quran means seeing on everything the stamp of God's attributes and the seal of His sustainership (*rububiya*). Living *tawhid* is to open a window directly onto His light from everything and to confirm and believe with the certainty of seeing that everything emerges from the hand of His power and that in no way does He have any partner or assistant in His divinity (*uluhiya*) and sustainership *(rububiya)*, and thus to attain to a sort of perpetual awareness of the Divine presence and to live with that awareness. *Tawhid* is not just a matter of creed; it is a lived reality.

We have also reflected on how the Quran teaches us that the creational *ayaat* carry messages from their Maker, messages that make Him known to us and teach us how everything glorifies Him:

> *The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, and the earth, and all that they contain; and there is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise: but you [O people] fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him! Verily, He is forbearing, much-forgiving!*
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> (Quran, Isra, 17:44)

We have emphasized that *tawhid* is much more than asserting that "God is one; He has no partner or like. This universe is His," because when this claim is made without investigating the *ayaat* in creation as they point to God's beautiful attributes, the door remains open to the possibility of *shirk*.

Shirk is about associating any power or attribute of perfection to any entity other than God, such as supposing that effects are the work of seeming causes. God compassionately warns us against *shirk* in the Quran because it doesn't have to be intentional, and we

can thus easily fall into it. Believing in God and God alone through the testimony of all His *ayaat* in creation is an act of conscious belief (*iman*). That is why it is important that we reflect, reason and remember. It is so important that we *cultivate* awareness, so as to engage in sincere *tawhid* and true surrender. We need to practice this awareness by seeing divine creativity beyond the surface of everything around us, by seeing signs in all the seemingly small aspects of creation we interact with on a daily basis. If we don't, for instance, reflect on the rain and the blessings sent through it, we will simply take it for granted. That is, when we are not in a state of awareness, then we are in a state of heedlessness or *ghafla*. *Ghafla* is like a default state, and unless we make the intention to cultivate genuine *tawhid*, in this state, we remain open to the possibility of falling into *shirk*.

But just as *shirk* leads to suffering, *tawhid* leads to *rahma*, a mercy from God. The fact that the Most Merciful, All-Compassionate, All-Wise, and All-Powerful One is already regulating everything and taking care of everything means we can surrender. This is why we need to know that everything is an *ayah*. This is why we need to see and witness the beautiful divine attributes reflected in everything, and that is possible when we interact with the world aware that everything is a sign pointing to His Beautiful Names and bearing messages from Him. Because when we do, we can truly live, breathe, and appreciate and enjoy life as *muslims*, those who have surrendered to the will of God. We can surrender because we know not only that He is Most-Powerful, but also that He is Most-Merciful, Compassionate, Just and Wise. With this knowledge, we can respond to life's ups and downs with patience, trust, and ease. When we remember everything is in the hands of such a One, then we can truly relax and rely upon Him: *Say: "He is the Most Merciful: we have believed in Him, and in Him have we placed our trust."* (Quran, Mulk, 67:29)[29]

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[29] There are many similar verses in the Quran. *Say: 'He is my Sustainer. There is no deity save Him. In Him I have placed my trust, and unto Him is my recourse!"* (Quran, R'ad, 13:30)

Say: 'Never can anything befall us save what God has decreed! He is our Lord Supreme; and in God let the believers place their trust!" (Quran, Tawbah, 9:51) *"And how could we not place our trust in God, seeing that it is He who has shown us the path which we are to follow? Hence, we shall certainly bear with patience whatever hurt you may do us: for, all*

This is what it means to live in our daily lives with genuine *tawhid*: we know that all things, all events are *ayaat* telling us about the compassion, beauty, generosity, knowledge, and power of their Maker, our Sustainer (*Rabb*), our Host in this world. So, through everything around us, whether seemingly big or small, we come to know God and to see and believe that truly "*all that is in heavens and all that is on earth extols His glory*" (Quran, Hadid, 57:1) and that "*there is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise*" (Quran, Isra, 17:44).[30]

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who have trust must place their trust in God alone!" (Quran, Ibrahim, 14:12) "*And thus it is [with most people]: if you ask them, 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' –they will surely answer, 'God.' Say: 'Have you, then, ever considered what it is that you invoke instead of God? If God wills that harm should befall me, could those [imaginary powers] remove the harm inflicted by Him? Or, if He wills that grace should alight on me, could they withhold His grace [from me]?' Say: 'God is enough for me! In Him [alone] place their trust all who have trust [in His existence].'*" (Quran, Zumar, 39:38) "*And unto everyone who is conscious of God, He [always] grants a way out [of unhappiness], and provides for him in a manner beyond all expectation; and for everyone who places his trust in God He [alone] is enough. Verily, God always attains to His purpose: [and] indeed, unto everything has God appointed its [term and] measure.*" (Quran, Talaaq, 65:2-3) "*I can be of no avail whatever to you against [anything that may be willed by] God: judgment [as to what is to happen] rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust: for, all who have trust [in His existence] must place their trust in Him alone.*" (Quran, Yusuf, 12:67) "*And place thy trust in God [alone]: for none is as worthy of trust as God.*" (Quran, Ahzaab, 33:3).

[30] Also in Quran: 59:1; 59:24; 61:1; 62:1; 64:1

Passage through Pain

> *And He it is who has set up for you the stars so that you might be guided by them in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea: clearly, indeed, have We spelled out these* ayaat *unto people who know! And He it is who has brought you [all] into being out of one living entity, and [has appointed for each of you] a time-limit and a resting-place: clearly, indeed, have We spelled out the* ayaat *unto people who understand! And He it is who has caused waters to come down from the sky; and by this means have We brought forth all living growth, and out of this have We brought forth verdure. Out of this do We bring forth close-growing grain; and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of vines, and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: [all] so alike, and yet so different! Behold their fruit when it comes to fruition and ripens! Verily, in all this there are* ayaat *indeed for people who will believe!*
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> (Quran, An'am; 6:97-99)

If seeing everything as *ayaat* reflecting God's Beautiful Names is the key to peace, then why don't we live with this consciousness, even after we understand that every single being is an *ayah*? Everything is an *ayah* means that whatever happens, happens with purpose, meaning, wisdom, and compassion. Why then do we keep forgetting and falling into *ghafla*? Would a doctor wake up one day and forget that she was a doctor and not go to the clinic or hospital? Or would she go there but then become distracted and not do her job? Of course not. We can't even imagine this situation. It would be ridiculous. Yet this is exactly what we do in life. We profess to be worshippers of God (*ibaad allah*), we say that we confirm *tawhid*—meaning that we realize that every single thing or event is an *ayah* from our *Rabb*—yet we often forget what this implies. We lose sight of the very truth we profess. Just think, when something we don't like happens to us, how do we react?

Let me share a simple example that happened to me the other day. I was doing some power point work which involved copying and pasting some verses under different themes. However, my computer would not copy Arabic script, and on top of that, it

somehow deactivated the copying function of the word file. Therefore, I could not copy anything, and I had to shut down the computer and wait for a while. What's more, I had to close the file before I saved it, so I had to start over. At first, I found myself getting frustrated and impatient, but then I reminded myself that I was doing this in the name of God. I asked myself what I was getting impatient with. I was blaming the computer just like we are inclined to cast blame on other people or external conditions whenever something seems bothersome to us. But can a computer do something mean to me? I laughed at myself when I realized this. Then, I decided to shut down the computer and just start from the beginning. I gave up using the Arabic script and choosing different themes, but instead just copied the verses, so in case I lost my data, I would still be able to play with the copy. In the beginning, I took the job of copying and pasting for granted as if it should happen without effort, then I realized that it is a blessing. And even if this simple task took more time during this project, it was meant to be so, because it at least taught me to not take things for granted and to be more consciously grateful.

This is a simple example from everyday life, but what about bigger concerns? Does it feel true, that no matter what has happened—including our illnesses, failures, loss, pain and hurt—that all of it are signs from our compassionate Sustainer (*Rabb*)? Often it does not seem that way. Our pain seems so real, so unfair. It seems so overwhelming that we can't even imagine a purpose in it, let alone wisdom and compassion. If we're reminded in that moment about the reality of *tawhid*, it seems so far away and unrealistic. All our attention fixes entirely on the pain itself. This is because we have not strengthened our faith in God with evidence that satisfies the mind and heart. This is an opportunity to wake up and consciously question our beliefs. For unless we believe in God consciously, unless our belief (*iman*) is based on evidences, we will end up in *shirk*, even if that is not our intention. But that is the point, *shirk* is characteristic of mindlessness and the mindless do not make conscious choices based on investigation. Yet this is not an excuse. Unless we believe in God consciously we are likely to end up in *shirk*. Indeed,

> *But [then]—how many a sign is there in the heavens and on earth which they pass by [unthinkingly], and on which they turn their backs!*
> *And most of them do not even believe in God without [also] ascribing divine powers to other beings beside Him.*
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> (Quran, Yusuf, 12:105-106)

And let's remember that *shirk* is not denial of the existence of God but rather a polluted belief that doesn't stand the test of hardships for instance,

> *And there are people who worship God on the borderline [of faith]: thus, if good befalls them, they are satisfied with Him; but if a trial assails them, they turn away utterly, losing [thereby both] this world and the life to come: [and] this, indeed, is a loss beyond compare!*
> *[By behaving thus,] they invoke, instead of God,*
> *something that can neither harm nor benefit them: [and]*
> *this is indeed the utmost one can go astray. [And*
> *sometimes] they invoke that what is likely to cause more harm than benefit: vile, indeed, is such a patron and vile the follower!*
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> (Quran, Hajj, 22:11-13)[31]

If you ask people who are in *shirk*, they think that they believe in God and they do—albeit in a very insufficient way. Their 'belief' is not based on any investigations or witnessing (*shahada*) of the signs but rather on claims and on blindly following their forefathers.[32] The following Quranic passage is worth reflecting on in this regard:

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[31] In the same chapter, the Quran says "*Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, so that all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is exalted, great!*
Do you not see that it is God who sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes green? Verily, God is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware. Unto Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and, verily, God - He alone - is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due. Do you not see that it is God who has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail through the sea at His behest - and [that it is He who] holds the celestial bodies [in their orbits], so that they may not fall upon the earth otherwise than by His leave? Verily, God is most kind, most merciful."
(Quran, Hajj, 22:62-65).

[32] There several passages throughout the Quran regarding this, such as the following: "*And when it is said unto them: 'Follow that which God has revealed,' they*

Say: "Unto whom belongs the earth and all that lives there on? Tell me this] if you happen to know [the answer]!"
[And] they will reply: "Unto God."
Say: "Will you not, then, bethink yourselves [of Him]?"
Say: "Who is it that sustains the seven heavens and is enthroned in His awesome almightiness?
[And] they will reply: "[All this power belongs] to God." Say: "Will you not, then, remain conscious of Him?"
Say: "In whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and who is it that protects, the while there is no protection against Him? [Tell me this] if you happen to know!"
They will reply: "To God."
Say: "How, then, can you be so deluded?"
Nay, We have conveyed unto them the truth: and yet, behold, they are indeed liars [i.e. intent on lying to themselves]!

(Quran, Mu'minun; 23:84-90)

And thus it is [with most people]: if you ask them, "Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?" - they will surely answer,

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say: 'We follow that wherein we found our forefathers believing in and doing.' What! Even if their forefathers did not use their reason at all, and were devoid of all guidance?" (Quran, Baqara, 2:170)

"And when they are told, 'Come unto that which God has revealed, and unto the messenger' - they say, 'Enough for us is that which we found our forefathers believing in and doing.' Why, even though their forefathers knew nothing, and were devoid of all guidance?" (Quran, Ma'ida, 5:104).

"Nay, but they say, 'Behold, We found our forefathers agreed on what to believe - and, verily, it is in their footsteps that we find our guidance!' And thus it is: whenever We sent, before your time, a warner to any community, those of its people who had lost themselves entirely in the pursuit of pleasures would always say, 'Behold, we found our forefathers agreed on what to believe - and, verily, it is but in their footsteps that we follow!'" (Quran, Zukhruf, 43:22-23).

"They are but names which you have named you and your forefathers [and] for which God has revealed no warrant. They follow nothing but surmise and their own wishful thinking. And now the guidance from their Sustainer has come unto them." (Quran, Najm, 53:23).

"Those who ascribe partners with God (shirk) *will say, 'Had God so willed, we would not have ascribed partners with Him, nor would our forefathers [have done so]; and neither would we have declared as forbidden anything [that He has allowed].' Thus did those who lived before them give the lie to the truth -until they came to taste the fear of Us. Say: 'Have you any knowledge that you could proffer to us? You follow nothing but conjectures, and you do nothing but guess.'* (Quran, An'am, 6:148).

> *"God." Say: "Have you, then, ever considered what it is that you invoke instead of God? If God wills that harm should befall me, could those 'imaginary powers' remove the harm inflicted by Him? Or, if He wills that grace should alight on me, could they withhold His grace from me?" Say: "God is enough for me! In Him 'alone' place their trust all who have trust [in His existence]."*
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> (Quran, Zumar, 39:38)[33]

This state of *shirk* is scary because the perpetrator is unaware of his situation but he is still responsible because he doesn't take action to live consciously. One of my favorite examples is that of a student who fails his exams. Can he plead, "But I did nothing to deserve this?" That's exactly why he's failed, he has done nothing, and yet as a student he was supposed to attend his classes and do the required work. So it is for us; we're endowed with consciousness and minds and many faculties for a reason, not just to live haphazardly. We are told in the Quran about the day of reckoning:

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[33] Similar passages abound in the Divine guidance. It is worth quoting some at length, so as to give ourselves more space to dwell on the importance of genuine *tawhid* for our lives. For instance:

"And thus it is [with most people]: if you ask them, 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' - they will surely answer, 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whichever He wills of His creatures: for, behold, God has full knowledge of everything. And thus it is: if thou ask them, 'Who is it that sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless?' - they will surely answer, 'God.' Say thou: '[Since this is so,] all praise is due to God [alone]!' But most of them will not use their reason. (Quran, 'Ankabut, 29:61-63)

"And thus it is [with most people]: if you ask them, 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' - they will surely answer, 'God.' Say: '[Then you ought to know that] all praise is due to God!' - for most of them do not know [what this implies]." (Quran, Luqman, 31:25)

"Now if thou ask those [who worship any being other than God] as to who it is that has created them, they are sure to answer, 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds!" (Quran, Zukhruf 43:87)

And who could be more unjust than he who slanders God or gives the lie to His ayaat*? Verily, such wrongdoers will never attain to a happy state: for one Day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say unto those who ascribed partners with God: "Where are those whom you associated with God (*shirk*)?"*
Whereupon, ***in their confusion****, they will only say: "****By God, our Sustainer, we were not*** **mushrik** *(those who commit shirk)!"*
Behold how ***they have lied to themselves*** *-and 'how' their false imagery has forsaken them!*
...
If you would see [them] when they will be made to stand before the fire and will say, "Oh, ***would that we were brought back [to life]: then, we would not give the lie to our Rabb's*** *(Sustainer's)* **ayaat***, but would be among the believers!"*

But nay [they will say this only because] ***the truth which they used to conceal [from themselves] in the past will have become obvious to them****; and if they were brought back [to life], they would return to the very thing which was forbidden to them: for behold,* ***they are indeed liars****!*

And they say, "There is nothing beyond our life in this world, for we shall not be raised from the dead." Lost indeed are they who consider it a lie that they will have to meet God -till the Last Hour suddenly comes upon them, [and] they cry, "Alas for us, that we disregarded it!" - for they shall bear on their backs their burdens and how evil are their burdens.

And the life of this world is nothing but a play and a passing delight; and the life in the hereafter is by far the better for all who are conscious of God. Will you not, then, use your reason?

(Quran, An'am; 6:21-32)

Let's now come back to our response to pain. When we are in a state of *ghafla*, unawareness, as outlined in the preceding verses, then we forget that our passing pain in times of hardship is also an *ayah*, we are misinterpreting our Sustainer's mercy (*rahma*). We believe His mercy has failed us or come up short.

Whenever we are convinced what befalls us is simply unjust and shouldn't have happened, we are actually denying God's wisdom and His mercy, *rahma*. At the same time, we're assuming that we know what is good and beneficial for us, which is untrue. Our knowledge of ourselves, our needs and of the world is extremely limited and what we think is good may well turn to be harmful and what we reject as bad may prove useful. As we're reminded in the Quran, *"It may well be that you hate a thing the while it is good for you, and it may well be that you love a thing the while it is bad for you: and God knows, whereas you do not know."* (Quran, Baqara, 2:216). We are also reminded of the fact that *"it may well be that you dislike something which God might yet make a source of abundant good."* (Quran, Nisa, 4:19).

Let us take the example of death: in our default state of unawareness, we find death ugly and unfair. Yet, as Imam Said Nursi explains, death is a blessing just like life; there are actually benefits in death. Among the many blessings of death is that it makes us realize the source of all life and be able to appreciate the eternal life stretching beyond death.[34] One blessing of death is that

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[34] Nursi says that verses like *Who creates death and life that He may try you, which of you is the best in conduct* (Qur'an, 67:2) "make it understood that 'death is created like life; it too is a blessing.' But apparently, death is dissolution, non-existence, decay, the extinction of life, the annihilator of pleasures; how can it be created and a blessing? The Answer: … [D]eath is a discharge from the duties of life; it is a rest, a change of residence, a change of existence; it is an invitation to an eternal life, a beginning, the introduction to an immortal life. Just as life comes into the world through an act of creation and a determining, so too departure from the world is through a creation and determining, through a wise and purposeful direction. For the death of plant life, the simplest level of life, shows that it is a more orderly work of art than life. For although the death of fruits, seeds, and grains appears to occur through decay and dissolution, their death is in fact a kneading which comprises an exceedingly well-ordered chemical reaction and well-balanced combining of elements and wise formation of particles; this unseen, orderly and wise death appears through the life of the new shoots. That is to say, the death of the seed is the start of life of the shoot; indeed, since it is like life itself, this death is created and well-ordered as much as is life. Moreover, the death of the fruits of living beings and animals in the human stomach is the beginning of their rising to the level of human life; it may therefore be said *'such a death is more orderly and created than their own life.'* Thus, if the death of plant life, the lowest level of life, is thus created, wise, and ordered, so also must be the death that befalls human life,

it is possible for new creations to come into being.[35] Upon reflection, we realize that death and life are not so much opposites as a pair and they function like a team to reveal the blessings of God. The Giver of Life (*al-Muhyi*) and Dealer of Death (*al-Mumeet*) are both Beautiful Names of God. It is through the dynamic contrast between death and life, night and day, darkness and light, hardship and ease, bad and good that we become aware of the blessings bestowed upon us, and we are taught wisdom. This is how we eventually come to know the Beautiful Names of God. That is why we're reminded in the Quran that

> *Every human being is bound to taste death; and We test you [all] through the bad and the good by way of trial: and unto Us you all will be brought back.*[36]
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> (Quran, Anbiya, 21:35)

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the most elevated level of life. And like a seed sown in the ground becomes a tree in the world of the air, so a man who is laid in the earth will surely produce the shoots of an everlasting life in the Intermediate Realm. As for *the aspects of death that are blessings,* we shall point out four of them. The First: It is a great blessing because it is to be freed from the duties and obligations of life, which become burdensome, and is a door through which to join and be united with the ninety nine out of a hundred of one's friends who are already in the Intermediate Realm. The Second: It is a release from the narrow, irksome, turbulent, and agitated prison of this world, and, manifesting an expansive, joyful, trouble free immortal life, it is to enter the sphere of mercy of the Eternally Beloved One. The Third: There are numerous factors like *old age, which make the conditions of life arduous and show death to be a blessing far superior to life.* For example, if together with your very elderly parents who cause you much distress were now in front of you your grandfather's grandfathers in all their pitiful state, you would understand what a calamity is life, and what a bounty, death. Also for example, it is understood *how difficult are the lives in the conditions of winter of the beautiful flying insects, the lovers of the beautiful flowers, and what mercy are their deaths.* The Fourth: Just as sleep is a comfort, a mercy, a rest, particularly for those afflicted by disaster and the wounded and the sick, so too is death, the elder brother of sleep, a pure blessing and mercy for those struck by disaster and suffering tribulations which drive them to suicide" (*Letters,* translated by S. Vahide, pp. 24-25, italics added).

[35] Ibid.

[36] The fact that God tests us with the good and the bad does not mean that the bad is evil. It is how we perceive it and how we deal with it that either harms us or benefits us. Hence, the Qur'an reminds us that, "*Whatever good happens to thee is from God; and whatever evil befalls thee is from thyself.*" (Quran, 4:79)

This balance of opposites is at the core of creation and that is why the spoiling of this balance is behind many of our life crises. Let me explain how. If we imagine success, for instance, to be sheer goodness without any challenges and that failure is the total opposite and hence it is all bad and without any benefits, the experience of failure is very likely to cause us great frustration, distress, fear and maybe even anger. Why? Because, we compare it to our illusion of what we think success is. And failure, in contrast, seems unbearable and painful. For instance, let's assume that my goal is to succeed at getting a certain job. But I fail to do so, and I feel awful. Why? What am I comparing this situation, which I call 'failure,' to? Imagine what the reality could have been if I had succeeded. Would there have been no challenges? Would life be great forever if I had succeeded in that goal, in getting that particular job? Probably not. Getting the job would have been only the first step in a series of challenges. The salary may be higher but who knows what the environment is like at that job? How about the colleagues? Would it have been easy to work with them? Would I have been truly happy in that job? It may be that since the salary is higher, it may require much more work, leaving me little time for myself and my family. What I want to convey here is that the reality is often different from the ideal situation that we may imagine and against which we measure our present condition. With this realization, my here and now becomes not as painful anymore. Because now I understand that whatever the situation here and now is, there are always benefits and challenges. 'success' comes with its challenges and 'failure' often teaches us memorable and important life lessons. The following verse reminds us of the importance of balance:

He (the Most-Compassionate) has set up the balance in order that you may not transgress the balance. Weigh, therefore, with equity, and do not spoil the balance!

(Quran, Rahman, 55:7-9)

Spoiling the balance can cause much unnecessary pain and heartache. Every time we assume that there is loss without gain, hardship without benefit, we don't have a balanced perspective because God always opens a door where a window is closed. There is no hardship without ease, as the Quran teaches us: "*And, behold, with every hardship comes ease. Verily, with every hardship comes ease*" (Quran, Inshirah, 94:5-6). Conversely, when we become aware of this balance, we stop resisting what's going on right now by dwelling in fantasies of what should have been, and instead we begin to surrender (*islam*) to what is being created. We become *muslims*, that is, *surrenderers*. While in this space of surrender and acceptance, we can find the wisdom in what's going in our life that's making us frustrated, unhappy, depressed or angry. When we surrender, our hearts are open to see the benefits in even the most painful situation and how it contributes to our growth. Indeed, as the wise Qur'an teaches us, "*It may well be that you dislike something which God might yet make a source of abundant good*" (Quran, Nisa, 4:19).

As we start seeing some benefits in an unwanted situation, we experience openness of heart, burdens are lifted, our dignity is restored and hardships become much easier to deal with. As God informs us in the Qur'an,

> *Have We not opened your heart, and lifted from you the burden that had weighed so heavily on your back? And have We not raised you high in dignity? And behold, with every hardship there is ease. Verily, with every hardship there is ease. Hence, when you are freed from distress, remain steadfast, and unto your Sustainer turn with love.*
>
> (Quran, Inshirah, 94:1-8)

The more our hearts are open to receive the wisdom in the creation of the good as well as the bad, the more we become aware that everything is created with meaning, for a purpose, and that it contributes to our life in ways that surprisingly call for much gratitude. We start appreciating whatever happens, as it is, right here and now. That is, we start appreciating the benefits of painful situations only when we stop comparing them (often unknowingly)

to a fantasy world with no challenges or drawbacks whatsoever. In comparison to our fantasy, the present hardship seems unbearable, and we cannot entertain even the possibility that it could contain some benefits. But the more we have a clear perspective of the end of the fantasy with its drawbacks and the painful reality with its benefits, the more we become aware of the balance in creation until we don't feel depressed anymore. Then we find the possibility of being grateful for whatever is going on in our life, the good and the bad, the wanted and the unwanted. Then we will know that there are benefits in failure and hardships in success.

Success and failure balance each other, and they exist in relation to each other. Think about it. What would success mean if there were no challenges and possibilities for failure? Wouldn't success be boring and meaningless? Without the possibility of failure, how would we appreciate success and seek it? Would there be thrill, excitement, or self-fulfillment in success? From this, we can conclude that when failure befalls us, instead of losing hope and sinking into depression, we can reflect on what it is teaching us. The very fact that failure elicits emotions like frustration, disappointment, and so on is a sign that urges us to ponder on the meaning of the situation. It also motivates us to work towards future success. Then we not only appreciate success but also failure as valuable teachers of wisdom. Remember that neither failure nor success can be the goal of this worldly ephemeral life. Together, through the mystery of contrasts, they constitute signs (*ayaat*) pointing to the gifts given to us through the balance of opposites so that we may be grateful. When our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are thus balanced, we can surf the bad and the good with peaceful surrender and with the conviction that all is well beyond the world of opposites, the world of the Beautiful Names (*al-asma' al-husna*) which the *ayaat* indicate and reflect.

This realization struck me when reading the story of prophet Yusuf (Joseph), peace be upon him, which is described in the Quran as "the most beautiful of stories."[37] Yusuf, peace be upon him, goes through what seem to us awful trials, yet he remains peaceful and surrendered throughout the story and he does not lose his trust in

[37] Qur'an, Yusuf, 12:3.

God. Yusuf's story actually teaches the meaning and wisdom (*hikma*) in the apparent ups and downs of life and how at the end of the day, everything comes with and from God's infinite mercy (*rahma*). This chapter teaches us how the balance of opposite pairs is itself a sign (*ayah*) to the Merciful Creator's wisdom, power, compassion, and other Beautiful Divine Names (*al-asma' al-husna*). From this perspective, Surah Yusuf, which is the twelfth chapter of the Quran, teaches how we may have a balanced interpretation of events. As we become proficient in this balanced interpretation of events, we find that the surrender to the balance of apparent good and bad, à la Yusuf, is not only transformative but also empowering. It becomes possible to appreciate our life and be grateful and praise God in all situations, easy and difficult, joyful and painful, in health and in sickness. Then we will be able to be grateful and praise God with all His Beautiful Names in all situations, the good as well as the bad.

Let us remember again that this transformation is incumbent upon our perception of the world as comprised of signs (*ayaat*) pointing to the Beautiful Names of God and hence is directly related to how we choose to live our life: with resistance, distrust and hardship or with surrender, ease and gratitude; as victims of aimless hardships and vicissitudes or with the awareness that we are guests of the Merciful Host. This realization brought about a major breakthrough in my life. It is now easier for me to remain grateful in all situations, in times of ease and in times of hardship. What is more, I can now feel the ease within the hardship, which sometimes manifests as a blessing in disguise or as valuable life lessons. As God reminds us in the Qur'an, *"It may well be that you dislike a thing even though it is good for you, and it may well be that you like a thing even though it is bad for you. And God knows and you do not know"* (Quran, Baqara, 2:216). *Subhanallah*, Glory be to God, reality is much more magnificent than our best fantasy.

As humans, we have been gifted with minds that constantly make connections, constantly search for meaning in what happens to us. In this sense, we are all story-tellers, busy composing the stories of our lives. In this process, we try to make sense of what has happened, connect it with what we are doing now, and project into our futures what ought to happen next. Sometimes in this process we become so attached to our versions of our lives —our *own*

desire is a sign from G-d, pointing to a dua an answer He will provide

fabrications—that we lose perspective. We lose sight that everything comes from God, the Most Wise, the Subtle, the Most Merciful. We think we know better. We think things should have happened as we thought they should, not as they did. We feel dismal with future prospects if they appear to offer something other than what we expect or want. Our expectations and wants are of course valuable but not because they make us know what is best for us—we actually do not know what is best for us. Instead, our wishes and expectations are *signs* pointing to our Rabb. As Imam Nursi put it, *"If God did not wish to give, He would not have given the wish."* Our wishes, needs, and aspirations are all indications that our Creator wants us to taste more of His blessings and mercy in a new way. What that new way might be is not yet clear to us and may not be in the form we imagine. Yet, in our heedlessness we lose this perspective, and we take our wishes and aspirations as ends in themselves and settle with a particular vision of what our life should be for us to experience benefit. We get stuck in *our version* of how life was, is, and should be. In such a disconnected state from the signs, and therefore from our Rabb, we cut the mercy out of our stories and can no longer feel it in our lives. We succumb to overwhelming feelings such as regret, sorrow, or self-pity, which cut so deep that we even find ourselves succumbing to anger, envy, and bitterness. The Quran wisely diagnoses our plight here:

> *And who could be more unjust than they who attribute their own lying fabrications to God or give the lie to His signs? Whatever has been decreed to be their lot [in life] will be theirs - till there shall come unto them Our messengers to cause them to die, [and] shall say, "Where, now, are those beings whom you were wont to invoke beside God?" And those sinners will reply, "They have forsaken us!" - and [thus] they will bear witness against themselves that they had been denying the truth.*
>
> (Quran, A'raf; 7:37)

What does it mean to "*attribute our own lying fabrication to God* or *give the lie to His signs*?" Imagine the parents of a sick child. They never expected that their child would have a chronic illness. So when their child became sick, they felt something wrong was happening. They tortured themselves wondering whether they could have

done something different: what if the mom had not taken a certain medicine during pregnancy, what if they had chosen a different doctor, what if they had made different decisions during labor and delivery, what if they had taken their baby out sooner or kept her home longer…? Seeing other families with healthy kids makes them want to cry as they long for what could have been. In these ways they have buried themselves in layers of regret, guilt, envy, and sorrow. How then will they attain to a happy state? "*Whatever has been decreed to be their lot in life will be theirs,*" but if they continue to believe in their own false *inventions* (that this is bad and unfair, that it was not meant to be, that it could have been otherwise, that it should have been different, that a different life would be better), they will lose sight of the blessings sent through their child in that condition and from the deep, beautiful meaning of their lives.

Why? Why do we find ourselves caught in situations like this? Because we easily forget that everything is transient (*fani*), impermanent. This is why we need reminders. We need to remind ourselves that everything is a passing *ayah* and everything comes from the Most Merciful. Then, when something painful happens to us, we can bear it because we know it will pass and because we trust that it was created with purpose and compassion. Like everything else, we can recognize even pain as an *ayah* bringing a message from our *Rabb*, and with this awareness, we will be able to see beyond it. Through being painful, illness for instance urges us to seek health. But if we appropriate our need for health and dislike of pain to ourselves, we won't see them as signs of mercy from our Creator. Instead, we will use them against God in order to accuse His mercy of falling short. But aren't we created with the need for health and well-being? How would we know that pain is 'bad' if we were not created with that disposition?

Take Prophet Ayyub (Job), peace be upon him, for instance. When he lost his family and property and fell gravely ill, what did he do? He cried out to his Sustainer, *"Affliction has befallen me: and You are the most merciful of the merciful!"* (Quran, Anbiya, 21:83). How could he assert amid such adversity that his Sustainer is merciful? The evidence was that his Sustainer had made him long for health and dislike illness and pain. Prophet Ayyub, peace be upon him, was aware that those feelings were not his. Hence, in his perception,

pain was the sign, the witness to God's mercy. Indeed, had God not willed to grant him health, He would not have given him the desire and need for it. Knowing this, Prophet Ayyub, peace be upon him, could surrender to divine will with (*sabr*) and trust (*tawakkul*) because he knew that misfortune, adversity and illness and the dislike for them, as well as the desire for well-being and prosperity and health, and prosperity and health themselves, are all *ayaat*, signs, indicating Divine mercy and wisdom; they all testify to Divine mercy.

When we recognize pain itself as an *ayah*, our attention turns toward listening to the message in the *ayah*, rather than focusing on the pain itself. It is not about resisting it, denying it, or trying to displace it with more 'positive' feelings. It is about honoring it also as a sign from our Creator, which entails listening to it and receiving its message. Only by receiving it, not fighting it, will we find release from the grip of pain. God does not burden us with more than we can bear.[38] In time, He removes our burdens. And, even amidst the hardship itself, through it, we will find ease if we look for it.

If we just stay with the pain with good intentions, it will push us to ask for the guidance, help, safety and connection that our souls crave so much. When we do this, God makes it easier to bear and gives us the patience to bear it and deal with it. As the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Amazing is the affair of the believer. There is good for him in everything and that is for no one except the believer. If something good befalls him, he is grateful and that is good for him, and if hardship befalls him, he is patient and that is good for him" (*Sahih al-Muslim*).

When the parents from the example above see all things including illness and pain as *ayaat*, their burden will be lifted. The layers of frustration that shrouded them in sadness will fall away and everyday joys will touch them again. They may find their struggles supported and cared for in countless ways. They may realize

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38 "*God does not burden any human being with more than he is able to bear: in his favor shall be whatever good he does, and against him whatever evil he does.*" (Quran, Baqara, 2:286)

through their sorrows and struggles, even their disappointments, that they have been given greater compassion, understanding, and wisdom. When we stay with our pain and sorrows with patience, listening for His messages and open to His guidance, we may see that indeed God helps us bear them and even sends many blessings through them. For instance, through illness we will realize that health is a precious blessing. Illness guides us to the Eternal Healer (*shafi*) to seek His help. Illness also uncovers within us a longing for eternal well-being; it makes us realize that the reality and beauty of health pertains to the beautiful divine name Healer. What is the benefit of spending our whole life in good health if we are never aware of its lasting source, only to wake up on our death bed and realize that health and prosperity in themselves were transient and fleeting and that we have nothing to hold onto? Wouldn't we feel distressed and distraught? Only by finding God, the source of all goodness, can the human spirit find peace and satisfaction.[39] And thanks to misfortunes and illness, we can find the Eternal Healer, our Compassionate Sustainer when we realize that the inner aspect of illness that looks to God, that is, it being a sign of God, is good and beautiful. This realization brings enduring joy to the human spirit. Praise be to God alone (*Alhamdulillah*)!

> *Have we not opened up thy heart, and lifted from thee the burden that had weighed so heavily on thy back? And [have We not] raised thee high in dignity? And, behold, with every hardship comes ease: verily, with every hardship comes ease! Hence, when thou art freed [from distress], remain steadfast, and unto thy Sustainer turn with love.*
>
> (Quran, Inshirah; 94:1-7)

Living Our Prayers

Living with genuine *tawhid* and surrender doesn't mean we are resigned and complacent, but rather, that we see meaning in everything, that we trust in God's Mercy and Wisdom, and by doing so, let go of our heaviest burdens, those layers of inventions we pile on ourselves. After a talk on the suffering of *shirk* and the

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[39] "*He (God) guides unto Himself all who turn unto Him those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of God - for, verily, in the remembrance of God [human beings'] hearts do find their rest.*" (Quran, R'ad, 13:27-28)

mercy of *tawhid*, a participant shared her experience of how remembering *tawhid* transformed her actions from an anxiety-ridden, false sense of control into a sincere and hopeful prayer. She said (I paraphrase):

> As I search for a treatment for my husband's sickness, I have felt like the burden is on me. What if I cannot find the right doctor? What if I have not seen enough doctors? How will I know which doctor to consult? This attitude leads to the path of *shirk* because I think I am deciding and the doctors' opinions are decisive. When my friend called me while we were in the hospital, she said that my search for different opinions and going to all those doctors were my actual supplication (*du'a*). All that we are doing is a prayer. You make supplication by raising your hands after the five daily ritual prayers, but you also make your supplication (*du'a*) by taking steps in life. We usually have the tendency to think that we or other people are the doers, and this kind of perception puts a lot of pressure on us. As in my example, if something goes wrong, then I think I failed in my search for a good doctor, or the doctor was not good enough to treat my husband. Once we realize that it is not our job to fix everything, but our job is to make *du'a*, this realization gives us much relief, because we know that God accepts our prayers in the best way. So, when I was confused about what to do with all the different opinions that the doctors gave me, my friend's reminder on the phone made me realize that I need not worry about all this, and through my prayers God will inspire me to make the best decision about which way to go and will make things unfold for the best. This is *tawhid*. When we are under severe stress, realizing that the actual doer of things is God takes the stress away.

✳ Indeed, as God says, "*No calamity can ever befall the earth, and neither your own selves, unless it be 'laid down' in Our decree before We bring it into being: verily, all this is easy for God. 'Know this,' so that you may not despair over whatever 'good' has escaped you nor exult 'unduly' over whatever 'good' has come to you: for, God does not love any of those who, out of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner*" (Quran, Hadid, 57:22-23). We may still worry,

for worry is what makes us seek help and pray, but when the worrying comes without prayer and awareness, then it becomes an overwhelming worry without any opening and hope. But, as in the case with this sister, worry is often what makes us seek help and guidance. There is also the good news that we do not have to find guidance the hard way. It can actually be very easy. Something might look like a big thing to us because it is not what we are used to, then it becomes something that we worry a lot about. However, if we see that all those things we take for granted everyday are indeed given by the Most Powerful and Compassionate One who says "Be and it is,"[40] then we see everything as the miracle it is: water, rain, the sun, even a single apple. With miracles all around us and within us, it is no longer farfetched to pray for a miracle. Indeed, our burdens are not just lifted, but in their place, we are given trust and hope. The situation itself becomes a means of making prayer sweet because it makes us realize how much hunger, how much need, we have for health, peace, safety, and assistance. If there is hunger, it is a clear sign that there is sustenance somewhere out there for us.

Indeed, we need some worry, some stress, some sense of responsibility—these things too were given for a reason, but when we respond to them, we are not making things happen ourselves, we are, as our sister's friend told her, making our intention, our supplication (*du'a)* and prayer.

I have another very simple example to share. After I recently got together with a group of friends, my friend kept telling me that thanks to my well-organized gathering, we got to be together and see each other again. I told her that it was not my efforts that made this happen, but that God, the Loving One (*al-Wadud*), wants us to feel loved, so He made this happen. How do I feel sure in my heart that it is not because of my good planning that everything worked so well? Because even when I employ my best planning skills, if it is not meant to be, then it will not happen because there are so many factors involved that are out of my control. In other words, anything could disturb my planning. I planned, and it "turned out"

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40 "*Whenever We [God] will anything to be, We but say unto it Our word 'Be' -and it is.*" (Quran, Nahl, 16:40)

well. It is a gift, and I am grateful for it because sometimes I plan just as well and it does not work. Noticing this, I develop the awareness that a successful gathering is beyond my planning. Even my planning is a means to make me aware that there is a Planner. I seem to have a few factors under control, and it takes so much focus, energy, and coordination to plan my little part of it. Yet, the biggest part—that everything else would work in alignment with what I planned—is out of my control. Through my efforts in planning, I understand that these things 'beyond my control' are not happening haphazardly, chaotically, but with purpose. So, my planning is my prayer: "Please, this is my prayer. Please, make this happen," and only the One who has everything under His control can make it happen. My planning is also an expression of my gratitude; I am very grateful because if it is just my hard work, it is like a chore and I will feel stressed and nervous. The perception of viewing my hard work as the creator of my success makes the job of planning a heavy burden. But if it is a gift, the burden lifts. The way everything comes together is more amazing and thrilling, and I feel both relieved and grateful throughout the process.

The Quran and the prophets were sent out of compassion to teach us how to live in this world a life of peace, thriving, and abundance, a life connected with our *Rabb* where we are aware of all His blessings, that we are His guests on earth, that all the Beautiful Names and the qualities that we value the most belong only to Him and that we have been honored with the capacity to recognize those Beautiful Names and reflect them in our life.[41] Therefore, when we experience pain, worry, or fear, we only need to remember Him and seek help from Him alone. He is all powerful and can grant any wish or desire. He is all compassionate and knowing. He is the One who makes me aware of my needs. He gave me the needs along with that awareness so I can reflect on who is taking care of me.

Who is the host and who is the guest? I am the guest here in this world. He is the sustainer taking care of everything. As I contemplate how everything is being taken care of and how many blessings surround me, my worries that once seemed larger than

41 "*And He [God] imparted unto Adam all the names.*" (Quran, Baqara, 2:31)

patience
prayer
awareness 86

life will begin to diminish. What seems bad or difficult will start to look small compared to all that is good, working, and beautiful. Eventually, through patience, prayer, and awareness, even my understanding of those seemingly bad things will transform until they too become *ayaat*, carriers of divine blessings and messages.

Life: Meaning, Purpose, Joy

> *O people, worship your sustainer, who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you might remain conscious of Him who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy, and has sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits for your sustenance. Do not then claim that He has partners when you know* [*that he is One*].
>
> (Quran, Baqara, 2:21-22)

The Quran is inviting me to worship God alone who has created me and all those before me. My parents did not create me. How could they be my creators when they themselves were created and passed away? God is the one who created them and through them created me. The Quran is inviting us to worship Him and remain conscious of Him. It reveals how we are sustained through a compassionate plan. The earth is a resting place, in other words, it was made with *the purpose* of being a home for us. The sky *is meant* to be the canopy of this house. He also sends us water from the sky, so water does not just happen to come along and give life to us, it is rather *sent* to us. Through water, He brings forth fruits *for* our sustenance. In other words, the purposefulness of the intricate order in this world bears witness to the Generous, Wise and Powerful Host. He is the one who established this earth and sky, who sends water, grows trees and various foods for our sustenance. Not only has He created us and given us lives but he also sustains and takes care of these lives. And He is doing all this *with purpose*.

The Quran says about those who profess true *tawhid*:

Allah is the host and I am the travelling guest.
We are sustained through a compassionate plan.

They reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: "O our Sustainer (Rabb) you have not created this without meaning and purpose."

(Quran, Imran, 3:191)

Recognizing every event, being, and thing around us as meaningful and sent with purpose transforms how we perceive and experience our lives from moment to moment. Everything that comes into our lives carries a message from beyond. Even our dreams, hopes, and longings carry messages. Hunger guides me to the food made together with me for my nourishment. Fear and worry turn me toward the only source of security and the one who answers prayers. Each need is a sign guiding us to fulfillment.

Let us better understand the benefits of the true *tawhid* in our lives with the example of eating an apple. Eating as a true *muwahhid*, as someone who practices true *tawhid* as taught in the Quran, involves reflecting on how food has come into being and its relation to the rest of the world (see Quran, 'Abasa, 80:24-32). Consequently, the true *muwahhid* reads the seals of divine oneness inscribed on an apple. He understands that it is a miracle, an *ayah* of power and mercy. Nothing apart from an All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and All--Merciful Maker could have made it. The apple becomes like a mirror reflecting the meanings of the beautiful names of the Maker; the Possessor of Power and Knowledge, the Provider, the Merciful, the Beauteous, the Sustainer. By reflecting on His miracles as such, we become aware that the beauty and art manifested in the apple are signs, *ayaat* indicating its Maker and making Him known with His attributes. This belief transfers the beauty of the fruit to the beauty of the divine action involved in bringing it into existence and offering it to us as sustenance. It opens a way to see through these divine actions the beauty of divine names and attributes, and through them the beauty and glory of The Maker. Thus, contemplating the apple and its coming into being becomes a means of knowing the Creator, loving Him, and worshipping Him.

When eating the fruit, the true *muwahhid* reads it with all his senses and ponders the pleasure derived from it. For, pleasure also is an

ayah that indicates just what a precious gift of mercy a single apple is. It turns the *muwahhid's* attention from the favor to the bestowal and from the bestowal to the true Bestower of the favor. Pleasure is a messenger that tells how much his Creator cares for him and loves him. The fruit becomes a token of divine favor and love. He also realizes that it is through hunger that he was able to read the message inscribed into the pleasure derived from the fruit. Hence he realizes that hunger has not been given to us only to satisfy our bodily needs, needs that will expire on the day we die, but more lasting needs as well. When the fruit is perceived as a package delivering a divine gift, the pleasure left from this realization is far greater than the pleasure obtained from the fruit's perishable matter. When a good friend sends us some homemade cookies in the mail, they bring much more joy than a package we pick up at the store. We forget all those treats we buy, make at home or eat while running errands, but we may always remember the cookies our friend sent which told us, without words, that she was thinking of us and cares about us.

Likewise, when a piece of fruit reminds us that we are the recipients of divine love and care, it gives a great and lasting delight and enjoyment. As Muhammad Jalal al-Din Rumi said, "When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy." That is the joy of feeling the presence of God's everlasting mercy, the delight of being the special guest of a most compassionate and generous host. This delight is the essence of gratitude and worship. It is the seed of the pleasures of paradise and a voucher of their existence. By 'reading' fruit in this way, the *muwahhid* confirms the truth of the verse:

For them there is the glad tidings [of happiness] in the life of this world and in the life to come.

(Quran, Yunus, 10:64)

The happiness mentioned here is the happiness of feeling close to God, the joy of living in the divine presence. Our desire for this happiness is given to us. When we look for happiness in other places and feel dissatisfied, that too is a gift, a sign telling us those

things cannot fulfill our deeper desire. So we keep looking with trust, hope, and prayer. As we rely on God, we become aware of *tawhid* and conscious of the ever-nearness of our compassionate Sustainer. Then we find our prayer for deeper happiness already answered. For the Quran describes those who get close to their Creator as those who experience true happiness in this world and the next:

> *Truly, to a happy state shall attain the believers: those who humble themselves in their prayer, and who turn away from all that is frivolous, and who are intent on inner purity.*
>
> (Quran, Mu'minun, 23:1-4)

> *Verily, they who are close to God, no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve: they who have attained to faith and have always been conscious of Him. For them there is the glad tiding [of happiness] in the life of this world and in the life to come; nothing could ever alter God's promises, this, this is the triumph supreme!*
>
> (Quran, Yunus, 10:62-64)

Securely Surrendered

Tawhid is an Arabic word that means affirming divine unity. It is a verbal noun that derives from the verb *wahhada*, which means *unifying* or *making one*. "One" here is not used solely to emphasize one God as opposed to multiple gods. One God also means God, one hundred percent: the one and only source of all goodness and perfection. It entails sincere and sheer trust that everything belongs to God one hundred percent. For example, compassion is God's quality entirely and there is no other thing that can claim to be a *source* of compassion. Our compassion all comes from God. It is an *ayah* indicating His all-encompassing compassion; it acts like a tiny mirror reflecting divine compassion. As I am sitting here, something happens, and it brings out compassion in me. I do not even know where it came from. Some event requires compassion, and so it is sent through me to make me take care of something or someone. So, whoever created the event and me, created this compassion when it was needed although I have no idea where it

came from. It usually overwhelms me, and I feel the urge to act on it. Then, being in the state of unawareness, *ghafla*, I say "*I* am compassionate." How can I be the one who is compassionate, when I do not even know or choose how and when compassion springs up in me? Thinking that somehow I generate compassion is a limitation of superficial *tawhid*. However, when I am conscious, then I see the compassion in me as a *gift* from God, revealing a glimpse, a small reflection of His compassion. With this awareness, I act in the name of God, The Compassionate, and say "Indeed, God is The Compassionate." Real *tawhid* is recognizing there is only one source of wisdom and compassion. The moment I go beyond superficial *tawhid* by realizing that God is indeed taking care of everything, I can surrender to him.

God's sole sustainership, His *rububiya*, is what really matters because it entails taking care of everything including things we think are small like water and air. We usually take these for granted as we see and experience them every day without much effort just like our breathing, seeing and hearing. We, however, need to be aware of and connect with them as signs that enlighten life. When I want to see a sign from God, sometimes I find myself waiting for something extraordinary that I am not used to. But these seemingly small things are not ordinary. In the Quran, there is no ordinary versus extraordinary. Every single thing is an *ayah* meaning that everything is a miracle. If you reflect on the food in front of you, you will realize what an honor it is that the whole universe is needed for this food to be there on your plate. Then, you will feel special. You feel like the guest of the *Rabb-ul -Alameen*, The Sustainer of All the Worlds.

As His guest, would you not feel secure and safe? Could you even worry about what may happen? It is all under control of the most compassionate Sustainer, who takes care of you. Remember when Ibrahim, peace be upon him, said: "The Sustainer of all the Worlds (*Rabb-ul alameen*) is the One, who has created me, who guides me, who gives me to eat and to drink, who restores me to health when I fall ill" (see Quran, Shuara, 26:77-82). When you contemplate this, how do you feel? Everything is being taken care of, so there is no reason to worry.

Through complete reliance on our Sustainer, we also find a deeper connection with all of creation. We realize that every event and every being comes from that source of sustenance. Nothing is alien in the universe, and we are connected to everything else. Everything is coming with a message for us that The Host has created this entire world for us to enjoy. We are all connected, coming from the same source to serve the same purpose of compassion and care. Sisterhood and brotherhood are not only among human beings but all beings, the whole world, and the whole universe. It is like an extended family. We all worship Him. That is what we say in *Surat al-Fatiha*: "You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for help" (Quran, Fatiha, 1:5). "We" signifies everything that exists. We all ask Him for help because there is nothing else that can help and everything is in need of help. Everything is created just like each of us, so we feel that bond with everything, and we feel empathy because we are all weak, needy, and vulnerable. This very vulnerability is the means of connecting to everything else. When we see this, it is very hard to not feel grateful. The more we are aware of this, the more we enjoy reflecting on all the blessings of our interconnectedness. Indeed, everything is a blessing, even breathing deeply. Breathing is a blessing that reminds us of life, the means by which we become aware of all the blessings around us. The more present we are here and now, the more connected we feel. And the vulnerability that had made us feel worried or insecure in our *ghafla*, in our awareness becomes like the hunger that makes us enjoy food even more. Praise be to God (*Alhamdulillah*)!

Vulnerability is the means of connecting to everything else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Constant Flow
Everything will perish except His countenance

> *And never call upon any other deity side by side with God. There is no deity save Him. Everything is bound to perish, except God's countenance. With Him rests all judgment; and unto Him shall you all be brought back.*
>
> (Quran, Qasas, 28:88)

Everything is bound to perish…

Reflecting on this *ayah* above, let us keep in mind we begin every *surah* in the Quran with "*bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*" which means "In the name of The Most Merciful, The All-Compassionate." So, whenever we hear the Quran, we are directed to listen for the good news of mercy (*rahma*) and healing that the present *ayah* indicates. At first glance the message here seems to hurt rather than heal. *Everything is bound to perish* reminds us of separation which is very painful. It reminds us that all our loved ones are passing. All beautiful people, all beautiful beings, all beautiful things are passing. All joyful events are passing, and we cannot stop them. We cannot stop our own youth from passing or even our own lives…

We usually go about our days as though life were permanent. We become so attached to everything around us as though we are going to live in this world forever. Would we be able to love this world so intensely if we lived with the awareness that it is passing, fleeting, and constantly changing? How much can we love transient things? Only by forgetting how transient they are can we get attached to them, only by living as though they were lasting, only by pretending or imagining that we will never leave this world that we love. That is why when someone does leave, we feel shocked. We can't believe it.

But this is the reality: everything in this world, including ourselves, is passing. Just look at the past—last year, last month, last week, yesterday, even this very morning—it all recedes. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "What is there between myself and the world? I am in this world like a rider who stops to rest beneath the shade of a tree then departs and leaves it behind." (Sunan Ibn Majah)

The Quran reminds us of the fleeting nature of this world so that we ground our life on enduring truth (*haqq*) and rely on God, the Enduring One (*al-Baqi*) alone:

Al-Haqq
Al-Baqi

> *And propound unto them the parable of the life of this world: it is like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth: but [in time] they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. And it is God [alone] who determines all things.*
>
> (Quran, Kahf, 18:45)

In our state of *self-delusion*, the world and all beings seem permanent and lasting to us. We enjoy this delusion, forgetting that our wealth, children, and even our own lives will not last. If they had been permanent, we would have perceived them as the reality itself. It is because everything is impermanent that we realize that they proceed from somewhere else. For instance, people come and go and others follow them. Each person is mortal and ephemeral, yet human beings are born every second. This flow of death and birth, of coming into the world and leaving, indicates a permanent source of all existence, an unseen realm from which all existent beings proceed. In other words, the fact that these transient beings keep being replaced, that there is this constant flow of creativity, indicates a realm beyond this world, a realm that is permanent and enduring, a realm that is the source of all creativity. If things and beings were permanent, there would be no indication for us to become aware of a permanent source beyond them. That is, they could not have functioned as *ayaat*, signs, pointing to an unseen and permanent realm (*'alam al-ghayb*). That is why when we live with the delusion that beings are permanent, we remain unaware of the *ayaat*, and consequently, we in vain invest our lives in passing

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delights. We boastfully vie with one another and become greedy for more worldly goods without ever attaining satisfaction.[42]

In order to break free from this delusion, we are taught in the Quran to reflect on the impermanence of this world throughout our days. For just as surely as all crops and plants will wither and turn to dust blown away in the wind, so too our lives will perish. Just as God sends rain, so He too sends all life. Just as the plants that grow from rain have a fixed term, so too does all else. The Quran repeats this reality that we might not get lost in worldly attachments and suffer from the delusion of permanence, but instead become conscious of that which does not perish:

> *And the life of this world is nothing but a play and a passing delight; and the life in the hereafter is by far the better for all who are conscious of God. Will you not, then, use your reason?*
>
> (Quran, An'am, 6:32)

We are reminded to cultivate our awareness when not in a state of crisis and before we enter our graves. Only acceptance and understanding of the transient nature of this world can protect us from the pain of trying to cling to what is bound to perish and to what has already passed. We are invited to leave our self-delusions behind by consciously reflecting on the *ayaat* in the world and listening to their messages until that becomes our way of life. The more we practice this, the more we realize that something impermanent cannot be our point of reference for what is good or bad for us.

something impermanent cannot be our pt. of ref. for what is good or bad.

[42] And the Quran invites us to wake up from our heedlessness by unveiling the reality of this world: "*Know [O people] that the life of this world is but a play and a passing delight, and a beautiful show, and [the cause of] your boastful vying with one another, and [of your] greed for more and more riches and children. Its parable is that of rain: the herbage which it causes to grow delights the tillers of the soil; but then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow; and in the end it crumbles into dust. But [the abiding truth of human's condition will become fully apparent] in the life to come: [either] suffering severe, or God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance: for the life of this world is nothing but an enjoyment of self-delusion.*" (Quran, Hadid, 57:20)

Why does the Quran need to tell us something that should seem so obvious: we will all die; every living thing will die; all things change, pass on, perish… We need to be reminded of this reality because reflecting on the transience of everything we love and value in life usually brings us so much pain and sadness that we often prefer to avoid it. We simply ignore it because it makes us feel lonely, powerless, and helpless. However, this reality—if we have the courage to accept it—can also put us in touch with our heart, that expansive part of us. We realize that we've been given a boundless capacity to love and that we are connected to so many beings around us. We care for them; we worry for their well-being; we nurture love towards them. This includes family, friends, and also other beings—animals, for instance. Even if you're not an animal lover, if in the middle of the night, you hear a kitten crying because it's hungry or in distress—can you sleep peacefully? Wouldn't you feel like helping if you could? Or at least wouldn't you be relieved if someone came to take care of the kitten?

In certain moments, we recognize and feel how we really are connected with the whole world as though it were our own family and house. And still, all these people, all these beings, the world that we are so much concerned about, that we care for so much does not stop. Everything is always changing, passing and leaving. And what remains is the pain of separation. It is as though our boundless love and attachment becomes the source of much pain and suffering. Why? What is the meaning of this suffering? This suffering is also an *ayah* just as our boundless love is.

But how is this love and pain a sign and what does it point to? Why do we want love to last forever and feel so hurt when it does not? Our boundless and intense love craves undying, enduring goodness, beauty, and perfection. Why do our hearts crave these things when the world seems to be devoid of them? Because the human heart's boundless capacity to love has not been given to us just to spend on transient beings and things. How do I know? Think about it, how much can we love and get attached to something if we keep in mind that it will leave us soon? Isn't the passing of beloved ones so unbearable that it can even spoil our

ability to enjoy them in the moment, here and now? That is, in order to love transient beings and things wholeheartedly, we tend to overlook their transience and imagine that somehow they are lasting beings. Actually, no love is possible without some sense of lastingness, some sense of immortality.

Imagine you check into a hotel room for a few days. Do you make plans to repaint the walls if you don't like the color or rearrange the furniture? Probably not. Why? Because it is not worth investing in something that won't last. Because we don't get attached to the room when we know we'll be leaving soon. The longer we stay in a place, however, the more likely we forget that we'll leave one day, and so we get emotionally invested and if the time comes to leave, it becomes painful. This pain of separation is the pain of remembering that there is no true lastingness in that thing or place and this is a sign, an indication that we long for everlastingness. If we always kept in mind that the things we love and appreciate are so short lived, would we be able to love them and get attached to them in the first place when merely imagining their departing saddens us? Indeed, as Imam Nursi insightfully notes, it is only after imagining some kind of immortality that we can love things and become attached to them. In other words, if there was no imagined immortality, there would be no love.[43]

Thus, upon reflection, we realize that the human heart craves undying and enduring goodness, beauty and perfection. Our love, our yearning for lasting perfection exceeds what these passing objects of our love are able to receive. As Ibrahim (Abraham), peace upon him, said "I love not the things that set." (Quran, An'am, 6:76)

This intense desire and hunger for immortality is an *ayah* indicating an eternal and enduring realm. We've been created with the need for food and nourishment and through this need we can appreciate the many delicious foods in the world. Through that relationship between our hunger and the food that satisfies it, we come to recognize the compassion, generosity, and munificence of our Sustainer *(Rabb)*. So also, we've been created with a need for

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[43] Nursi, *Flashes*, "Third Flash."

eternity, and this need is so intense that all pleasure and joy depends on eternity (*baqa'*). Even the thought of the absence of eternity is unbearable and can even spoil worldly pleasures here and now. But, just as our hunger is created together with our sustenance, so too this need indicates an eternal realm.

Eternal Countenance

So, the fact is that all things *are* transient, but in their transience, they indicate an enduring Creator. For instance, the passing beauty of every spring is a sign pointing to the enduring and eternal beauty of the Enduring One, *al-Baaqi*. So too, the passing of all living beings indicates the enduring life of the Ever-Living, *al-Hayy*, who is also the Giver of Life, *al-Muhyi,* to all others. When we see a beautiful flower blossom, its beauty indicates the eternal beauty of its Maker. That flower soon wilts, dies, and its beauty turns to dust, making it clear that the beauty did not come from itself but from the unseen. In other words, the transience of the beautiful qualities that make transient beings so lovable, those beautiful qualities that our hearts long for mirror the enduring qualities of the Enduring One who alone possesses beauty, life, compassion, and munificence.

With this awareness, wherever we look, wherever we turn, we see God's Beautiful Names and qualities, and we will find that aspect of the world that looks to Him and to His Beautiful Names, *asma al-husna*:

And to God belong the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance.

(Quran, Baqara, 2:115)

All that is on earth will perish, only the Countenance of your Rabb is enduring, Master of majesty and generosity.

(Quran, Rahman, 55:26-27)

So, wherever we turn there is God's countenance, and His countenance will not perish. In other words, the beauty, life,

G-d is only reliable source of reference for those things to which He directs us because He is the only Permanent thing.

munificence, and perfection in all beings, which are the cause of our love, are in fact *ayaat*, signs of the Enduring Sustainer's beauty, life, munificence and perfections. They are like the shadows or reflections of the manifestations of His Most Beautiful Names. And though these shadows, these signs will perish, the qualities they reflect, those qualities we need and love will not. That is why God is our one reliable source of reference,

> *And never call upon any other deity side by side with God. There is no deity save Him. Everything is bound to perish, except God's countenance. With Him rests all judgment; and unto Him shall you all be brought back.*
>
> (Quran, Qasas, 28:88)

> *God-there is no deity save Him; to Him belong the Beautiful Names (attributes of perfection).*
>
> (Quran, TaHa, 20:8)

Together these *ayaat* show us the way to healing, the way to the eternity we desire and crave so much. They remind us of the Enduring One, the source of enduring perfection and goodness. There is no deity, nothing worth being worshipped and loved except Him. Why? Because you see everything else is perishing, passing, except His countenance, except His face, except that aspect of the world that looks to His Enduring Beautiful Names. So when the heart finds the enduring source of all beauty and perfection, it loves it! The more we are aware of the Enduring One, the more our heart gets filled with His love until it no longer becomes attached to transient beings. So when transient beings pass, instead of causing pain, they remind us again that only our Sustainer *(Rabb)* is Enduring and only His Beautiful Names are eternal. We are grateful for their coming to our lives, reflecting love, beauty, and compassion, but we can also let them go because we know those qualities endure and will be reflected in others. For instance, when I love the beauty of a flower in the name of God, I see how it reflects the Beautiful, and when it wilts and dies, I find in that another *ayah* reminding me that everything is transient but

Mashallah! guaranteed

God. I understand that nothing is (in itself, in its transience) worth my heart's attachment except as an *ayah*, except as a manifestation of the beautiful divine names. Only that *ayah* aspect of beings, that aspect that looks to their Sustainer is worth loving, for the sake of our Sustainer *(Rabb)*. And so I love all things *bismillah*, in the name of God.

This way the heart is healed from the endless pain and wounds of separation from all its transient passing beloveds. It is built into our natural disposition (*fitra*) to long for eternity. However, it is foolish to look for eternity in this transient world. When we reflect on the transience of the constant flow of beings in this world, we will understand how they reflect the eternity of their Maker. Since our Sustainer *(Rabb)* is enduring, since His Beautiful Names are enduring, all is fine. Everything becomes like a mirror to His eternity. They reflect a sort of enduringness, permanence. Their transience becomes like a window onto the everlastingness of their Maker. His Enduring Being satisfies our intense desire and need for immortality and eternal love. That is why we're taught in the Qur'an:

Those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of God - for, verily, only, in the remembrance of God can hearts find rest.

(Quran, Ra'd, 13:28)

Whoever surrenders his whole being unto God as a muhsin, *he has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing; for with God rests the final outcome of all events.*

(Quran, Luqman, 31:22)[44]

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[44]The term *muhsin* is usually translated as "doer of good." However, it refers to a deeper sense of goodness in the Quranic context, expressing a special awareness of God that enables the person to act with goodness in God's name and respond to the difficulties of life with wisdom. Thus, for instance, Prophet Yusuf (Joseph), peace be upon him, is described as *muhsin* in the Quran. In other words, the *muhsin* is the worshipper of God who lives with *ihsan*. In the Prophetic tradition, (*hadith*), known as the Hadith of Gabriel, *ihsan*, has been described as follows: "It is reported that Gabriel asked the prophet

When we see with the heart-glasses of enduringness, always witnessing the enduring countenance of God, *wajh allah*, in all passing things in this world, then we begin to rejoice in seeing His Enduring Beautiful Names everywhere. Our heart can then see the eternity of God in all passing things. And with patience, we begin to see how transience opens a window to eternity. And when we see that, we can love everything in His name, for His sake, free of attachments and suffering.

This is the way to much healing and mercy, *rahma*. It opens the gate to a great and amazing possibility: finding eternity within transience, here and now. How? When we spend our life living in His name, our love will bear enduring fruits of the hereafter for as we're told in a hadith, *"the world is the sowing-field for the hereafter"* (Sahih al-Bukhari).[45] Otherwise, we will live a transient life with transient passing results. Yes, one moment in the way of knowledge and love for our Enduring *Rabb* feels a like a year or more, since for the *ruh*, the spirit, it opens a window onto permanence and eternity. Meanwhile when not spent in His way, in His name, a year or even a whole lifetime becomes at the end like a mere moment.

There is a saying in Arabic, "The broad earth with enemies is like a drinking-glass, while the eye of a needle with friends is like a broad arena." When we are immersed in good company, or goodness more generally, even a tiny area feels spacious. In the same way, even a brief moment spent in the way of God feels long. In a sense, it touches eternity because it will bear lasting fruits in the next life, *al-akhira*. However, when our time is spent for the sake of transient things, even the most "successful" life by worldly standards cannot transcend transience and no matter how long that

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Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, 'Inform me about *ihsan*.' And the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "It is that you worship God as if you see Him, for if you don't see Him, He sees you." (Authentic (*sahih*) hadith found in Muslim and Bukhari's collections.) That is, the *muhsin* worships God as if he sees God because he sees the face or countenance of his *Rabb* in all events including adversities. He sees the aspect of things that look to God and His Beautiful Names.

[45] Also in the 40th Hadith of Imam Nawawi's *Forty Hadiths*.

life may be, at the end it feels brief because everything ends. Finite success and transience can never satisfy the heart, which longs for immortality. And so years of transience feel like a fleeting second, like an illusion or a dream, filling the human heart with much regret and sorrow.[46]

So the crucial question is: Do you want to transform your transient and brief life into a beneficial and long life? Think about it, how much of our life is spent in a useless way and how much of it was worth living? Isn't it time to make a sound choice? Wouldn't it be nice to have no regret when we leave this world? Isn't it most worthwhile to seek the means to transform our fleeting and brief life into a perpetual life with lasting results?

And the means for this amazing transformation is to live in the name of God, *bismillah*, and to work for the sake of God, the Enduring One (*al-Baaqi*), and to love for God's sake only. Then not only will we be saved from the pain of transience but our hearts will also find rest and peace. Let us conclude this chapter with a beautiful call from the Quran:

> *That abode of the Next World— We grant it to those who do not seek glory on earth or to cause corruption in it. And the best end is for the God-conscious*
>
> *Anyone who does a good deed will be rewarded with what is better. And anyone who does a bad deed will only be repaid for what they did.*
>
> *Surely He Who has ordained the Qur'an on you will bring you to the best end. Say, "My Sustainer (*Rabb*) knows best who has brought guidance and who is plainly misguided."*

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[46] Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *The Flashes: From the Risale-i Nur Collection*, "Third Flash," trans. Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1995), 29-34.

You did not expect to be given the Book. It is nothing but a mercy (rahma) from your Sustainer (Rabb). So do not lend support to those who deny the truth.

And do not let them turn you away from God's ayaat after they have been sent down to you. Call to your Sustainer (Rabb) and never be one of the those who commit shirk.

And do not invoke any god along with God. Because there is no god except Him. All things are passing except His countenance. Judgement belongs to Him and to Him you are returning.

(Quran, Qasas, 28:83-88)

CHAPTER FIVE

Bismillah:
Read in the Name of Your Sustainer

We begin this last reflection with a supplication (*duaa)* taught by the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him:

✳ *O God, teach me that which is beneficial and benefit me with what you teach me.* (Sunan Ibn Majah) ✳

Today lots of knowledge is available to us, but only some of it is beneficial. So, when we ask for knowledge, it is not just any knowledge. We ask God to grant us knowledge that is beneficial. But that alone is not enough. We also ask that God benefit us with that knowledge. For knowing, even knowing what is beneficial, is different from benefiting from that knowledge. It is a question of how we live with what we know. Take for example *bismillah.* We say this multiple times every day, we know that it means *in the name of God* and we may even know that whatever follows its evocation should be done with consciousness and awareness. This is very beneficial knowledge, but what do we do with it? How much do we benefit from it? What we are doing in these reflections is not always bringing new knowledge but more importantly learning how to benefit from what we may already know. We are returning to what we know, connecting to it, making sense of it, putting it into perspective, and learning how it is related to us here and now in order to 'take it in' and live with it, embody it.

Reflecting on the meaning of true *tawhid* as it is taught in the Quran and its relevance to our lives here and now, we have found it is not enough to intellectually know that there must be a Creator who creates everything. We must also directly witness and experience *tawhid* in order to enter a state of true belief and surrender. Even the prophet Abraham, peace be upon him, sought such direct affirmation to attain peace in his heart:

And, lo, Abraham said: "O my Sustainer! Show me how You give life unto the dead!" He (i.e. God) said: "Do you have no faith?" [Abraham] answered: "Yea, but [let me see it] so that my heart may be set fully at rest."

(Quran, Baqara, 2:260)

It is not enough to understand that God is the Creator of all, we need to see and experience it for our hearts to be fully be satisfied and for *tawhid* to become our lived reality. Only when we see the evidence of divine unity throughout the universe can we testify to the truth of *tawhid*. Only then can we truly say *I bear witness that there is no deity but God (ash-hadu an la ilaha illa allah)* …

The Quran teaches us that true confirmation of *tawhid* starts with contemplating *how* beings, events, and all other things come into being: "*Do they never* ***gaze*** *at the clouds pregnant with water, and observe* ***how*** *they are created? And at the sky,* ***how*** *it is raised aloft? And at the mountains,* ***how*** *firmly they are reared? And at the earth,* ***how*** *it is spread out?*" (Quran, Ghashiyah, 88:17-20)[47] That is, we are prompted to make an inquiry that observes *how* those phenomena of the universe unfold. Taking this lead, we came to question the relationship between things which we usually take for granted such as water, plants, and fruit. At first, it seems like water gives life to plants since they die when not watered. However, when we stop and question this assumption, it becomes clear that water cannot give life since it is itself lifeless. It is also clear that our logic is faulty. Remember, just because there may be no light if the bulb breaks

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[47] Such a call is repeated in other parts of the Quran. "*Say: 'Have you* ***seen*** *if God should take away your hearing and your sight and seal your hearts - what deity but God is there that could restore it all back to you?' '****See how*** *many facets we give to our* ayaat-*and yet they turn away!*" (Quran, An'am, 6:46) "***Look*** *at these signs of God's grace -* ***how*** *He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! Verily, this Selfsame [God] is indeed the One that can bring the dead back to life: for He has the power to will anything!*" (Quran, Rum, 30:50) "*Say: 'Go all over the earth and* ***look how*** *[wondrously] He has created [humans] in the first instance: and thus, too, will God bring into being your second life for, verily, God has the power to will anything!'*" (Quran, 'Ankabut, 29:20)

or if a wire is disconnected, that doesn't mean that the bulb or the wire themselves make light.

Thinking along these lines, we came to recognize the interconnectedness of all things: for a plant to grow, it needs not only light, earth, air, and water but also the seasons, and thus the specific alignment of the sun and earth. It also needs the so-called laws of physics and chemistry. Each being needs to behave in harmony with the rest of the universe. Because of this intricate interconnectedness, the maker of one thing can only be the Maker of everything. Whoever is responsible for the growth of the plant is the One who has the whole universe under His control.

When we look at the world with this consciousness, for instance, when we don't take the growing of a plant for granted, then we start seeing the world in a different light. Water is no longer a veil to divine creativity but a sign indicating God's activity and His comprehensive sustainership (*rububiya*). So we begin to understand the connection between signs and *tawhid*. When we are aware that everything is a sign, an *ayah* pointing to divine creativity, as the Quran repeatedly tells us, then we realize that there is only one single source of creativity, one source of life, one source of being…

Iqra… Read …In the Name of Your Sustainer

Before he was appointed as the Messenger of God, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, sat alone on a retreat in the Cave of Hira, reflecting. When Angel Gabriel came upon him in this state, what was the first thing he said to The Prophet? "*Iqra.*" Read. The Prophet replied, "I cannot read; I am not a reader." Again Gabriel commanded, "Read," and again, The Prophet peace and blessings be upon him, said that he could not. Yet again, Gabriel said, "Read".

What was Gabriel commanding Muhammad (pbuh) to read? We usually think he was referring to the verses of the Quran, however the Quran had not yet been revealed as this event precedes the first Quranic revelation. So, what was the Prophet (pbuh) supposed to read? Why would Gabriel ask him to read before he taught him what to read? Do you think he did not know that The Prophet was

illiterate? Gabriel came on behalf of God, so he surely knew, but then why did he insist on asking him to read?

Are words the only thing we can read? Don't we sometimes read people's faces for instance? So, there are things others than words that may be read and there are also many ways to communicate non-verbally through expressions and gestures, such as through sign language for example.

Gabriel is the angel of revelation. If he is bringing something from God, it must be something new, something we do not know—not only something we do not know but also something that we cannot find on our own without the guidance of revelation. There are things we can find on our own by virtue of the way we are created (*fitra*). That is also a form of guidance but not direct guidance like revelation. There is no need to repeat what God gave us already, what our *fitra* makes clear. Revelation only brings something that we need from it alone, that which we cannot get elsewhere. For instance, Gabriel would not have come to teach The Prophet how to read script because someone else could have easily done that. So, when he says "Read," he must mean another kind of reading. If Gabriel asked The Prophet, peace be upon him, to read, it means that he knew The Prophet was able to do that kind of reading.

After repeating "Read" three times, Gabriel continued, saying, "*Read in the name of your Sustainer* (Rabb) *who has created.*" In this sentence we find some clues for what and how Muhammad, peace be upon him, is expected to read. *In the name of your Sustainer*, and *the sustainer* is identified as The *Sustainer* who *creates*. So, this reading must be related to creation. So what is he going to read? Creation. In later revelations, we're told repeatedly in the Quran, that everything in creation is a sign, an *ayah*. These signs are to be read in the name of our Sustainer who creates. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, a man who never learned to read script, was charged with the mission of teaching all of humanity, all of us, how to *read creation* in the name of our Sustainer from the moment of the first revelation to the end of time.

We can see the mercy and the wisdom in God's usage of "Sustainer" in the first revelation. The people of Mecca during that time regularly used the word *Allah* (literally "the god") to refer to God, but the word had certain connotations in their culture which could leave God seeming remote. Recognizing there is a Creator is just the beginning. There must be a Creator, there must be a God—but who is He? That is what the Quran is about, God making Himself known to us with His many beautiful attributes of perfection (*al-asma' al-husna*). Who is God? Just saying that He created the heavens and the earth is not sufficient for us to have a connection with Him. If God just created the heavens and the earth at some distant time, it feels like He has nothing to do with me here and now. So from the very beginning the Quran provides this clarification and reveals our relationship to Him. God does not use the word *Allah* to describe Himself at first. The word chosen instead is *Rabb*, which in Arabic means the one who takes care of you, the one who sustains everything. It feels very close: the one who sustains you, the one who takes care of everything. Not only does it feel close in the sense that you can feel the compassion inherent in being taken care of, but also because it means you cannot run away from Him. There is mercy and wisdom in the use of *Rabb* here because it clearly invites us from the very first revelation to see that God is taking care of us, that He is always involved and accessible, and this makes us want to know more about Him and encourages us to read the universe in the name of this One who takes care of all of it and each of us.

Tazkiyah: Purifying False Perceptions

The Quran tells us there are signs in the outer world such as the sun, air, water, and food and signs in ourselves such as our abilities to see and hear. Furthermore, our feelings—including love, fear, anxiety, anger and so on—are also created; they are also signs. Even anger is an *ayah*. And if it is a sign, then it is meant to be read. Not read in any way, but in the name of The Sustainer, that is, in the awareness of the One who takes care of us. When we are young, we may think we hate the rules our parents impose upon us and see them as useless and unjust. But as we grow older and wiser, we usually learn to see those very rules as a reflection of our parents' care, as coming from and providing love, mercy, and

guidance. Likewise, our perception of something we think of as bad, such as anger or sorrow, may transform when we learn to reflect upon it as a sign pointing to our Sustainer's love, care, and guidance.

Yet, usually when I am angry, it is hard to see it as an *ayah* because I identify with it. I say, *I am angry*. I might wonder, why did God create anger, something that I do not like, something that causes me such anguish? We react quickly to unpleasant feelings with aversion, either trying to deny and repress them, or succumbing to them and feeling overwhelmed. But our reactions to these seemingly negative feelings have more to do with our perception of what they mean than what they actually are in creation.

The Quran teaches us how to read all signs properly so we can distinguish between our perceptions and reality and thus receive and understand the messages sent to us. Anger is something created, meaning it comes into being; it does not exist on its own. It is also an *ayah* and therefore it carries a message. But what is its message? What is its meaning from beyond, its purpose? How is anger something sent from the Most-Merciful and All-Wise?

There are times when anger can be justified and serves as a reminder to take some needed measures to remedy a situation. However, if anger is unjustified this may be a time to question our misunderstandings and rectify them. To do so, we need to realize that when something happens it always comes through the filter of our perception. For instance, if you look at something, you may think, "Oh this is so beautiful. I like everything about it," but somebody else might feel repelled by that same object. You like a certain color, but somebody else does not. Just because I do not like a certain color, it does not mean that color is bad. So if someone said to me, "Your dress is ugly," I will maybe think what she said lacked tact, that it was rude or that she is criticizing my taste, or maybe she is insinuating that I am unrefined. The words she spoke are fact, but my understanding of them, and thus my reaction to them, may or may not reflect reality. It is based on my perception of the facts, that is, on how I read the situation.

So, I learn to stop, to acknowledge my anger as a sign to be read. I ask myself why I became angry and realize it is just because someone said, "Your dress is ugly." To take another example, someone may tell me, "What you said was rude." Then I can stop and ask: is it truly rude? It may be. I might have said something without thinking, then I can say thank you, thank you for reminding me. I may or may not say it out loud, but I will feel a moment of humility and gratitude. Taking time to follow my anger without reacting hastily, it can lead me to this state of learning. Maybe she did not mean to remind me or help me, but it is not for me to discern or worry about her intention. Her words were something created and for me they served as a reminder. Things are not happening haphazardly. Even if I do not think that what I said was rude, then I say, ok it is up to her, I do not think that it is rude. Still, is there a need to be angry? If she is not my reference point and I feel my statement was not rude, even if she thinks it was, it will not worry me. Again, if I listen to the anger as it arises, it becomes a moment of insight and understanding. I may learn what habits of thinking and feeling I have fallen into. Do I often feel my mood and self-worth hinges on the opinions of others? If so, okay, but need it be that way? What else might happen in those moments? Stopping to listen to the message opens up new possibilities.

When I am in a state of unawareness (*ghafla*), in a state of heedlessness, in a state of living haphazardly, I never stop to ask: What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of things around me? When I don't stop, and question these things, how can I distinguish between the facts of reality and my perception of them? In that situation, I am more likely to conflate my perception of reality with the reality itself. Consequently, I believe I got angry at the person because she 'criticized me and accused me of being unrefined;' when in fact the person simply expressed her dislike of my one dress and it was I who perceived it as a general statement concerning my whole person. Could this have been her true intention? Possibly. However, I cannot be certain from that one single statement. Therefore, what made me angry was not really what she said but how I interpreted it through my own perception.

When I stop and remember that my anger and frustration too are messages, they are *ayaat*, they have a purpose, then I am released from feeling the need to escape them or wrestle with them. I will not be angry about being angry, or scared of the anger, or despaired by it, and so I can stop burying myself in more and more negative reactions. Then, there is some space that opens up and the pausing itself becomes the intention to read, to listen and wait for the meaning to be disclosed. Meanwhile, I have come back to a state of awareness. I can see that my anger is still here, but now I begin to understand how my anger arose because of things I have made up. When we question our perception, it might be consistent with reality or it might not. For instance, "I do not prefer" is different from "it is bad." Just because you do not like something, does not mean that it is not valuable. Whatever is created is good.

Anger itself is good because it is like a traffic light. It makes me stop and ask: why am I angry? It could be that I need to feel anger to take action, like the anger we feel when we hear about or observe an injustice. That anger compels us to act, and when we do so in the name of God, recognizing anger as a sign carrying His message, then we will not just *react* in the heat of the moment, but instead, we will *respond* consciously with wisdom, with compassion.

Let's consider an example of reading another common feeling as a sign. I have an upcoming job interview and I feel anxious. My mind is whirling with worries: Am I good enough for this job? Will my outfit look okay? Is my resume impressive enough? Maybe there are more qualified applicants? As my head spins with these thoughts, I have to stop and ask, "Is it true?" …Is it true that they won't like me or that I am somehow *not good enough*? If I just pause and put trust in God, I will remember that the interviewers do not know me, I do not know them, I cannot control them, and I do not even know whether this job is best for me. My success or failure in the interview does not indicate my worth or future happiness. There are too many factors, too many unknowns. God will take care of my worth and my happiness, through this job or something else, as long as I do my best and turn toward Him.

Let's consider another example. I have an important exam coming up and I am afraid I will fail. If I truly desire to pass, I pray for it,

and part of the prayer is studying to prepare for it. But sometimes we find ourselves just sitting around, avoiding what we know we should be doing. I am afraid I will fail, yet at the same time I won't pick up my books. Why do I live this contradiction? It is because I don't just fear failure in and of itself. Failure means something more to me. I might think that if I fail, people will think that I am not smart enough, I am stupid. If I believe a person's value depends on their aptitude reflected in their degrees and professional qualifications, I may think that in order to be worthy I have to excel in these things. If not, I will be worthless. The fear of being worthless, of being "a nobody" may become so overwhelming that I become paralyzed by it and find that I cannot even bring myself to study for the exam.

When we reflect on our feelings of anxiety or fear, we can begin to recognize the perceptions that give rise to them, and then we can question those perceptions. We may notice that when we equate success and value with intelligence, degrees, and societal positions, it often leads to states of fear, insecurity, emptiness, envy, or arrogance. Here we can stop and question our assumptions: does my degree or my job or my passing this exam really determine my value? No, it does not. The Quran gives different guidelines for success: purifying our hearts, through things such as patience, good deeds, faith, and adherence to the truth. This success clearly does not depend on degrees, careers, or jobs. Remembering this aligns my understanding with the actual reality of universe and brings immediate relief.

> *Consider the human self, and how it is formed in accordance with what it is meant to be, and how it is imbued with moral failings as well as with consciousness of God! To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this [self] to grow in purity, and truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness].*
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> (Quran, Shams, 91:7-10)

When I leave imaginary, inflated fears behind, what remains is a much more manageable amount of anxiety. That anxiety in itself is good because it will motivate me to prepare for, and heighten my focus during, an interview or exam. Fear itself is good if there is real danger because it helps protect me. But if I start fearing all

kinds of illusory things, fear becomes a handicap and life gets very difficult. Did my Sustainer make my life difficult or did I? I did because I am not reading "fear" in the name of my Sustainer.

We all have fears whether we are aware of them or not. But our fears do not exist out there. I am fearful about my future and my children's future. When I feel that I cannot control something, I panic and I fear. But when I say *bismillah* (in the name of God), it means that everything is under control. It may not be under my control, but it is under control. If I internalize *bismillah*, will I be fearful about the future? If I don't feel sure about whether everything is being taken care of, then the Quran says stop and reflect. Think about the past. How much was under my control? I want to believe that I can control things in my life because that is how I make myself feel relaxed. The Quran wants to wake us up. We do not want to wake up because when we do, we realize that nothing is under our control, we are powerless, and at first, the idea of that overwhelms us. We worry everything will be out of control. Yet usually when we try to act as if we *are* in control that is actually how things feel: *out of control.* When we actually wake up, there is a great relief through the realization that *we* are not in control but *Someone Else is.* This brings great relief because if we were in control, there would be a mess because we are so limited. It is good that we are not in control, and it is good that the Sustainer of the all the heavens and earth is. In sum, it is good that we want things to be under control and feel scared when we think they are not. We just need to see all this as signs and to follow where they are leading us: to rejoicing in the fact that things are *not* in our control, but are under the All-Wise, All-Knowing, All-Powerful and All-Merciful Creator's control.

So, there is good news in waking up and questioning our fears. Fear looks ugly to us but if something has been created, there is a reason. Inner signs always carry messages, yet usually we do not like them, so we close the door. Sometimes we have fears that continue for years and years—why? Because they came to fulfill a purpose. They will not go away until we listen to them. When we try to bury them, or don't listen in the name of the Compassionate, our fears can fester and multiply until they seem to be countless and overwhelming, but there is just one key to release them:

revising our perception. When we use that key, our understanding opens up and all those fears diminish.

We need to understand the distinction between reality and perception because the moment we hear that everything is a sign, we always ask: but what about all those bad things? When we live in our own heads without any connection with our *Rabb* and hear someone say God created everything, we start to accuse Him for all our hardships, our excess of anger and sorrow. But as we begin to read the signs in and around us in the name of our *Rabb*, we learn to distinguish between reality and perceptions and see the degree to which our hardships arise or are compounded from misperception, not actual reality. Then even our perceptions themselves start to move away from misunderstanding and towards truth. That is, our perceptions begin to align with reality, with the meaningful happenings of a universe created by the All-Merciful Sustainer. In the example of the well-organized gathering mentioned earlier, at first glance it seems that I am the planner and organizer. Until, we question that unverified perception and we realize that the factors involved in the happening of those events in that particular order are innumerable and mostly beyond my control. Then we start realizing that our limited planning is actually like an *ayah* and a unit of measurement of the Only Planner. It makes the Divine Planning known to us. Now our perception is aligned with the reality that only He who has control over all things and creates and sustains all things can be the Planner of each and every event.

During a Receiving Nur online Quran study session, when we were exploring the distinction between reality and perception, a participant brought forward concerns many of us share. She brought forth the question of why we often neglect the small miracles around us. Part of the problem, she said, is that we live in a world ambushed by news about the large-scale conflicts and problems of the world. Furthermore, many of us have families living in parts of the world where there is much hardship and conflict. And so, we feel that so much of our mental energy is consumed by thinking about things that we have no immediate control over. We spend a lot of time not even making human-to-human contact, and that causes us to be less attentive to and

grateful for what is immediately in front of us. Then she asked me, "Do you have any advice for us on how to be attentive to the small miracles in our daily lives while maintaining our empathy for the people in the larger world?"

This dilemma reminds me of the water and God question. At first, the question looks like "Is it God or water that makes the plant grow?" or "Is it God and water?" In fact, it is neither of these. It is *through* water that I find God with all His names. It is about a completely different way of perceiving the world. That is what the Quran is teaching us. The Quranic wisdom is teaching us the *tawhid* way of thinking, which is being aware of these different kinds of connections. We are being created right now. We are being inspired with our questions, with the answers, and what we make of them right now. When we are aware of that, then we start to become aware of all the miracles, the blessings, and the *ayaat* (signs) around us. With that awareness when we hear something about people being sick and suffering somewhere else, things will be different in our perception.

Like Prophet Ayyub, peace be upon him, we will remember that our very dislike for suffering and sickness is an *ayah*, a sign. It induces in us the desire to help those people in need and do something to alleviate their pain. This desire is also an *ayah* testifying to divine mercy, compassion and assistance. But if we start listening to the news about the world when we ourselves are disconnected from the reality of being created, of being guests of the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate Host, our perception of the facts becomes distorted. Then, we are going to process the information that we get based on our state of unawareness. It is going to take the color of our *ghafla* eyeglasses. If our eyeglasses are dark, everything we see through it will also be dark. So, before we can deal with the world out there, we need to first ground ourselves in reality. Only then, will we be able to see the world in a beautiful way. We will be able to see those aspects of things and events that look to His countenance, those aspects that reflect the beautiful attributes of perfection (*al-asma' al-husna*).

The Quran teaches us the distinction between facts and perception. We can only differentiate between facts and perception

when we are conscious and awake. When we are not even aware of who we really are, how could we evaluate what is going on out there and how could we know what to do about it? We would not know what to do with the compassion and empathy that we have for others and with our feeling of wanting to help. Then, not being able to help them becomes a burden, and it may become so burdensome that we cannot even pray for them, because we do not see the compassion there, and we are completely disconnected. But, when we ourselves are grounded then everything starts making sense in a different way. We start learning the language of the *ayaat*, the signs, and we become open to their messages, but when we are not connected, we are not even aware that they are signs. It is like seeing something written in another alphabet. I cannot read Chinese, but at least I know that it is a language. Imagine someone who does not even know that it is a language. She would not even try to have it translated to understand it.

That is what the Quran is teaching, how to shift our perception and begin to view the world as filled with signs. Everything has a meaning beyond itself. Don't get stuck in the thing itself. I will always have my particular perception of it, but if I am aware, my perception will begin to transform. It becomes closer to reality or, when it doesn't, at least I am aware of it and know that it comes from me, from my internalized understandings and habits of thinking and feeling. We make The Prophet's (peace be upon him) *du'a*: *Oh God, show us truth as truth, bless us with following the truth, show us falsehood as falsehood, and bless us with avoiding it.* Help us see reality as it is and receive the blessings in it; help us see our misperceptions for what they are and let them go, that we may not be stuck in them or harmed by them. Fear is a sign to protect us from dangers, but if we make up illusory dangers, then it becomes not a blessing but a handicap, an obstacle preventing us from clearly seeing reality. The present seems insufficient, the past full of mishaps, and the future perilous, so we start complaining. We become ungrateful, but what generates this ingratitude does not actually exist. It is all in our minds. It is our own illusion. And these illusions are what bury our hearts and block us from God's Mercy. So even as we sometimes repeat "Praise be to God" with our tongues, the praise has not penetrated our hearts.

That is why attaining true spiritual understanding is a process of *tazkiya*, meaning inner purification. That is, believing genuinely in *tawhid* is a process of purifying ourselves of false perceptions, all the illusions and assumptions that we rarely stop to question. If we do not do this consciously, it is as though our glasses are tinted blue and so all we see appears blue, yet we never realize it is because of our glasses, and so we think it is really just a blue world and complain about it. We feel that we have a lot of evidence that it is blue all around, because, we say, look we can see this and that are clearly blue. That reality will seem so consistent with what we experience that we will never question it or doubt it unless we begin to focus our attention on our lens itself. Only then will we realize we can take off our glasses. And simply by taking them off, the world will be revealed in all its color.

Reading: Interplay of Signs

Signs out there are also signs within the self. I think that I am not involved with the seemingly external reality only when I am unaware. The food looks good out there, but the food is only food because I need it to stay alive, to be healthy and nourished. I know food because I eat it, because I see it, because I smell it and taste it. It seems like I am afraid of an interview or of an illness that is out there in the world, but I am afraid simply because of the way I perceive things. An illness is not just something out there. Of course, it does exist out there, it is a fact of life, but how I experience it and respond to it is my perception. That's why when it says in the Quran that there are *ayaat* in the outer world and in yourselves, this does not mean necessarily two groups, one here and one out there.[48] The fact that they are mentioned together relays the fact that they also exist together. There is no sign out there that does not coexist with something within.

The Quran gives us cues for how to read signs in and around us, where to focus our reflections, and what this process of reading

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[48] "*In time We shall show them [make them fully understand] Our ayaat [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this is indeed the truth. [Still,] is it not enough [for them to know] that your Sustainer is witness unto everything?*" (Quran, Fussilat, 41:53)

involves. We are reminded again and again to look to everyday happenings, things we usually pass by without thought, and to reflect on the meaning and miracles in them. Let's look closely at one such passage:

> *Behold in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those who are endowed with insight.*
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> (Quran, Al 'Imran, 3:190)

First of all, notice how we are told that recognizing and relating to signs is a matter of insight, of stopping our habitual mode of thinking to reflect on what is going on around us. Secondly, note that the original word used here for "creation" is *khalq*, which is not a static word, it is in the *masdar form*, the equivalent of the English gerund or *-ing* form. So we are told to behold *the creating* of the heavens and the earth, with an emphasis on the dynamic flow of creation. One of the signs of this flow is the succession of night and day. Night and day reveal the movement of the earth, its rotation around itself and its orbit about the sun. *Khalq* gives the sense of the ongoing movement embedded in all creation. Things are always coming into and out of being. The sprouting leaves of the spring and the falling leaves of autumn. Life emerging and passing out of this world. Even human life constantly comes into and out of being. Thirty years from now some of us will no longer be in this world. Forty years ago, some of us were not yet here. Amazing.

As this *ayah* draws our attention to this flow, it starts with the general—the creating of all the heavens and the earth—and then brings our attention to something specific that we experience very directly and clearly, the succession of night and day. There is great wisdom in this order as Imam Nursi explains. He points out that it is difficult for the human mind to consider the whole cosmos and deduce that truly *the heavens and the earth* are God's creation.[49]

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[49] "*Verily, it is God [alone] who upholds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate from their orbits; for if they should ever deviate, there is none that could uphold them after*

That is why we are directed to consider single events such as *the succession of night and day.* When we reflect on the earth's rotation around its own axis and its revolution around the sun, we understand that whoever is responsible for *the succession of night and day* can only be one who has the power and knowledge to sustain, control and manage the motions of the planets and all the laws and order governing them. That is, the unity, harmony and purpose that this system exhibits indicate a single source of creativity, power and knowledge. Eventually after due reflection, we conclude that indeed, "*in the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those who are endowed with insight.*" Then since all things are interrelated, it is understood that whoever created *the succession of night and day* and the solar system, created the earth and the sun and all that is within them. For instance, whoever created sunlight, must be the creator of sight (our eyes). Whoever created day and night is the creator of living beings with the need to sleep and rest at night and so on. The reasoning is that whoever creates one single particle must be the creator of the whole cosmos because all beings are inextricably interconnected, so much so that one cannot exist without the rest. For example, for a fruit to exist, its tree, the earth, air, sunlight, the seasons, the whole solar system etc. must exist. They are inseparable. Then, when we extrapolate this logic to the rest of creation, even though our minds cannot encompass the heavens and earth, we are able to confirm that indeed there are signs in their creation that point to the One Creator with all His attributes of perfection. That is the wisdom behind why the Quran constantly draws our attention to single instances of divine creation that can be observed so the heart does not forget the Sustainer and so as to not overwhelm the human mind with the whole cosmos, the heavens and the earth.[50]

Take note here: it does not just say "behold …the night and day" but rather "the *succession* of night and day." We are asked to focus our attention on the fact that one comes after the other. Why? If it was day all the time would we even realize it? We would probably

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He will have ceased to do so. Verily, He is ever-forbearing, much-for-giving!" (Quran, Fatir, 35:41)

[50] S. Nursi, *The Words: From the Risale-i Nur Collection*, revised ed., translated by Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004), pp. 19-20.

not even have a word for it, because there would be nothing to distinguish it. When we hear "the creation of the heavens and the earth" it may seem so big—how can we know it, how can we relate to it all—but then we are shown how through an example. Through contrasts in our direct experience, such as seeing the sky darken each night and grow bright again each morning, we can observe that the universe is moving, ever-dynamic, yet filled with order and purpose, with an elegant interrelatedness; the earth, the sun, the moon, all in orbit, all vital in their movements to life as we know it. Through the sleepiness that overcomes us each night and the renewed energy we feel upon waking, we can connect directly to this dynamic flow of creation, to "the process of creation *(khalq)* of the heavens and the earth" through the orbits, rotations, and other movements that distinguish our days.

Just as the contrast of night and day make known the movements, order, and purpose of creation, so too the existence of contrasting experiences such as pain and pleasure, sadness and happiness, sickness and health, imperfection and perfection also makes our lives meaningful. It is through these contrasts that we come to see the *signs* of God throughout the world. That is how we come to see how life points to the beautiful qualities of the One beyond. For instance, through illness and the resulting desire for health we become aware of God as the Healer (*al-Shafi*). Through hunger, we appreciate sustenance and become aware of God as the Provider (*al-Razzaq*). Without hunger, would we be able to appreciate food? Without the possibility of sadness, would we treasure happiness? Without the possibility of failure would success be thrilling and self-fulfilling? This dynamic relationship between opposites constitutes the *ayaat* indicating the beautiful attributes of perfection (*al-asma' al-husna*) beyond opposites and contrast.

We see in the Quran, for instance, how the Prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, knows his Sustainer through his experience of hunger and satiety, illness and recovery, life and death:

> *[T]he Sustainer of all the worlds, who has created me and is the One who guides me, and is the One who gives me to eat and to drink, and when I fall ill, is the One who restores me to health, and who will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life…*
>
> (Quran, Shu'ara, 26:77-81)

Through the recovery of illness, the satiation of our thirst, and the promise of resurrection, we come to know the beneficence, generosity, and wisdom of our Sustainer. Realizing everything is a sign means that we can see the stamp of sustainership (*rububiyya*) on all things. *Tawhid* is generally translated as oneness. However, oneness in Arabic is the noun *wahda*, something static, whereas the verbal noun *tawhid* connotes a dynamic process. It more accurately translates as *unifying* or *making one*. The more we become aware, the more we recognize the unifying source of everything. So, it is not so much oneness as opposed to two or three; it is *wholeness*. *Tawhid* means there is wholeness to reality, as opposed to saying, "Sustenance is from God sure, but come on, without food will you be full?" The earth, sky, air, the seasons and climate, the laws of physics and chemistry, in fact, all the cosmos, are brought together for a single fruit to ripen, for a single tree to grow, for a single atom to exist. Only the All-Powerful and All-Knowing can coordinate and create this interplay of so many things to provide our sustenance.

After having food, the Messenger of God sometimes prayed like this, "*All praise is due to God who has fed me and provided food without any endeavor or any power on my part*" (Tirmidhi). God feeds us not only by providing food, but also by giving and sustaining the complex processes that allow us to use its energy and nutrients. When we eat, we have little to no idea how our food is digested. But, we don't have to know; we don't even have to think about it. The whole process from the beginning to the end is being taken care of with no effort or power on our part. Yet, normally we credit our own effort. We think that we have worked hard to provide ourselves and our families with nourishing food. But most of us just go to the market and pick whatever we like right off the shelves without thinking even of where it came from or how it was grown, raised, or made. Even farmers only plant seeds and wait. These

small actions are so minute when compared to all the intricate processes involved in the growth of the wide array of food we enjoy. Still, we are very much focused on the doing part. We must stop and think, how much of it is my doing? Even my doing itself is an inspiration. Even my doing is part of the receiving. We think we can grow food, we really have no idea how to make things grow or not grow. Just look at our own fingernails. They grow, but we do not make them grow. Actually, if it were up to me, I would rather just make them stop, but I cannot.

However, we forget and so we think, "I am buying this food. I am growing it." That is how we usually reason. That is what we learn at school. Without a farmer planting the seeds, would crops grow? Without rain, will any plants grow? Therefore, the rain makes them. But how can it make them grow? It does not have life itself. So, the Quran teaches us how to question these assumptions we learn and take for granted. Things are created in togetherness, and the fact that one thing is coming from another, like a baby and the mother, does not mean that one is causing the other. Similarly, just because two things are next to each other, does not mean one is making the other.

When Ibrahim (Abraham), peace be upon him, is thrown into the fire, God says to the fire "*Be coolness and peace on Ibrahim*" (Quran, Anbiya', 21:69). And it is cool. How can fire and coolness come together? It seems strange to us, maybe even impossible. But if on His command fire becomes cool, it means that fire does not burn on its own. Burning and fire are put together a little like we put a bulb, a switch, and between them a cable so that when we flick the switch, the light turns on, yet someone who is not aware of the whole system says oh the switch brings light. This is exactly what happens when we do not stop and reflect. We see fire burning, fire burning, fire burning, so we start to take it for granted, and we think that burning is an intrinsic and essential property of fire, so they will always have to come together. But in the Quran, God says that He commanded the fire to be cool and it was cool, meaning that fire does not act blindly, according to its wishes and nature. Rather it acts in the name of its Creator, in compliance with His command. It burns because it is commanded to do so, and hence, it did not burn Ibrahim, peace be upon him, because it was

commanded not to burn him. We may find it hard to believe because we take it for granted that fire necessarily burns. But let's stop, meditate, and reflect: What does the burning process entail? It is a reaction, which involves not only the burned material before and after the burning e.g., cotton and ashes, but also air, oxygen and the laws according to which the cotton and other materials burn. When burning, the carbon in cotton reacts with the oxygen contained in the air converting cotton into gases and ashes. Another effect of this combustion is heat and light. And the whole transformative reaction occurs with precise order.

This means, that like other events, burning also cannot be isolated from the rest of the universe, which is an inseparable whole. All events are interrelated and therefore, for one event to occur the whole universe has to be there in the first place. Therefore, in order for causes to produce an effect, however small it is, they have to be able to produce the whole universe in which that effect takes place and from which it cannot be separated. Similarly, 'burning' is incumbent on innumerable conditions. Then, it becomes clear that whoever is responsible for the burning must have knowledge of all the components involved as well as of their chemical and physical properties. He must also possess the power to control all of them and their inter-reactions with each other in precise order, all of which are interconnected with the rest of the universe. And fire possesses none of these qualities. All elements involved in combustion are contingent, unconscious and powerless. Fire has no intrinsic power; it can be extinguished. Therefore, fire cannot produce burning just as the switch does not make the light and just as causes in general cannot create. This corresponds to the first part of the testimony (*shahada*), *la ilaha*, which means, *there is nothing worth worshipping*. At the same time, we deduce that the agent of the burning, can only be the possessor of encompassing knowledge and power which corresponds to the second part of the *shahada*, *illa allah*, which means *except God*. To wake us up from *ghafla*, from time to time, God causes an interruption, such as in Ibrahim's case. This interruption makes us pause and reflect and observe the *ayaat* such as combustion and renew our testimony (*shahada*), that indeed, there is nothing worth worshipping except God, there is no creating power except God.

In the history of Muslim thought, there is a big debate about whether causes produce effects or not. A minority of Muslim scholars has said yes, they do[51], but the majority has said they do not and that the order itself is in fact a sign of the order in creation and therefore of the Orderer. Fire burns by God's command and cools by God's command. In the eyes of the unaware, it looks like the fire is burning. It looks like an apple is feeding me. It looks like water sustains me. I drink it, and it goes to all my cells and knows how to interact with everything. Even more, anyone can drink water, and it works fine. Think about all the different kinds of animals that depend on it. Do you think they have the same anatomy as we do? In all of them, water works fine. Can I give it to plants? Yes. How does the water know what to do in all these different creatures? Does water itself know all this? If so, we should start worshipping it, for without water there is no life. But look at it, it does not even have life itself yet all living things are constantly coming forth through it. In the Quran God says, "*We made everything alive with water*" (Quran, Anbiya, 21:30). We cannot go throughout our lives saying, "How could I know better? It just seems like water gives life." We must stop, reflect, reason, and listen to the signs in creation. If we do this, we will find that water itself is telling us: *I know nothing. I am under His command. I am only a mirror to the Sustainer.* That is, it is glorifying its Maker and making *tasbih*.

So, let us not get stuck in the mindset that "sure, the universe on the whole may belong to God, but the rain makes plants grow, and our food sustains us." Wherever the heart thinks sustenance is coming from, love will go there. It means we are still attached to the things themselves. That is called *shirk*. It is the only transgression that is not forgiven. Why? Not because God does not want to forgive us, but because we are going away from His forgiveness. We are going the wrong direction. It is the worst injustice against ourselves: to be stuck in the things themselves, unable to see beyond them.

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51 Of course, even they added to this claim that these causes do so through a power ultimately delegated by the Creator. But such addition was more of a statement without evidence (*taqlid*).

Everything is a sign, speaking of Him. When we do not realize that *tawhid* means wholeness, we fall into *shirk*. The unifying does not seem whole or complete, but lacking. In reality, there are no partners with God, but in our perceptions, there seem to be many. When we are stuck in our illusions, when we are not even aware of the distinction between reality and perception, when we think that our perceptions *are* the reality, then we start dividing things up: we attribute 80% to God and 20% to causes for instance. All our troubles come from false perceptions, from *shirk*, because *tawhid* is not a dogma; it is just reality, it describes what *is*.

> *He to whom the dominion over the heavens and the earth belongs, and who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion: for it is He who creates everything and determines its nature in accordance with [His own] design. And yet, some have taken, besides Him, imaginary deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have no control to avert harm from, or bring benefit to themselves, and have no control over death, nor life, nor resurrection!*
>
> (Quran, Furqan, 25:2-3)

Who creates everything and determines its nature in accordance with His own design. He made the food so that when you eat it, you enjoy it. How can food itself know how to give you joy and pleasure? These things are given through food, but food itself is just a mirror. Only the One who knows our hunger and taste buds, our memories and feelings, can meet our needs so aptly. The food does not know. If pleasure came from the food itself, the more I eat the more pleasure I would get from it, but that is not the case. God created our nature along with the nature of food. He created everything together, in accordance with His design, and thus through food, water, earth, and the universe He controls life, death, and resurrection. Nothing else has power over these things. And yet, some have taken, besides Him, imaginary deities: food, money or whatever we give importance to, whatever we imagine has the power to benefit or aid us.

Ways of Worship: *'Ibada* and *Dhikr*, Love and Remembrance

Worshipping God alone is not about denying ourselves joy or somehow resisting our connection with creation. Rather, it is enjoying those gifts *in the name of God*. It is not true that if you do not eat food, you will be worshipping God, and if you eat food, you will be worshipping the food. Rather, the point is to eat with awareness that it is your Sustainer who is feeding you through the food, not the food itself. This applies to love too. When you love someone, love him or her in the name of God. What does that mean? Does it mean do not love your parents, kids, friends, spouses, and so on? No. Love them in the name of God. When we love them in the name of God they become even more valuable, more beloved, more beautiful to us, because they are gifts and reminders of Unending Beauty, because they reflect His Beautiful Names.

One of the names of God is *al-Wahhab*, The Bestower, and we sometimes think of worship as something we do in return for all the gifts God has given us. But how can we return anything? How can we give back? Can we give anything to the Provider? We cannot; we only receive. We are always receiving. We are receiving our sight every moment and the light through which we see. We even receive language, knowledge, and understanding. We receive quiet moments and the time, space and capacity to reflect. In fact, we even receive the guidance of how to worship and the blessings that come with it.

The Quran references creation to give us guidelines about how to read it so that we are not stuck in it. In this way, creation becomes a means to go back to God. That in itself is worship. It is not something we do in return for God's favors; it is *returning to* God, turning toward Him through all things. So worship is not a burden. It is not as if He is giving me something, and I am paying Him back. I am already enjoying the food, the only thing that turns that enjoyment into gratitude to God, worship of God, is that I am aware that it is from Him. The moment I am aware my love goes not to the food but to the Provider of the food.

So, if we are not giving anything to God, what is worship? It means to revere and adore. Adoration. To love. How can you not love the one who takes care of you all the time? When I am hungry and I eat something I like, it feels so good. Worship is to direct that feeling, that is, direct our love, gratitude, and praise to the One who provides for us. We do this instead of leaving it at: oh, it is very nice food, I really like it. If my love goes to the food, I miss the essence of worship. I can go and prostrate in prayer, but my heart is not prostrating to the Provider. My eyes, my insight is veiled by the food. Yet, the food itself is not an obstacle; on the contrary, it is a sign. The Quran says read each sign in the name of your *Rab*. If I read it *bismillah*, in the name of God, it also means *bismi-al-Razzaq*, in the name of the Provider, *bismi al-Rahim*, in the name of the Merciful, *bismi al-Rahman* in the name of the Compassionate, *bismi al-Wadud*, in the name of the Loving. The joy, beauty, nourishment, and love I receive through the fruit connects me back to my Sustainer and makes Him, and all His Beautiful Qualities, known to me. So, when we become aware of signs, of how creation testifies that all beautiful names belong to God, then all the praise for those beautiful qualities gets directed to God. We become aware of the bountiful gifts in our lives and our gratitude also goes to the Bestower of Gifts. We feel taken care of, and our love goes to the Sustainer. This natural praise, gratitude, and love all are ways in which we worship when we enter a state of awareness.

The *salaat* prayer is our time alone one on one with the One we adore and love. We connect with Him and feel gratitude for the blessing of living in His presence. When we pray, we are expressing our gratitude for all the blessings that have already been given to us. When we pray, we are not giving anything to God. God does not ask us to pray because He needs our worship. We are the beneficiaries. He is not in need of us or our praise. Rather, we are in need of Him, in need of remembering Him, in need of surrendering and giving thanks. The five daily prayers are a reminder to surrender and offer thanks, gratitude, and praise. Through them we find the essence of worship.

Remembrance, in ritual prayer and throughout the day, is an essential aspect of worship. It returns us to, sustains, and enlivens

our consciousness of God. In Arabic, the word for remembrance is *dhikr*, and *dhikr* is an important form of worship in Islam. Saying *bismillah* is *dhikr*. We usually say it before we eat, when we begin a new task or embark on a journey. A lot of Muslims make this evocation dozens of times a day. In our five daily prayers alone we say *bismillah* 17 times. So, what is the wisdom in this repetition? Remember, repetition indicates importance. What else do we repeat all the time? Eating, drinking, and breathing—we never complain about these things or become bored with them. On the contrary, we enjoy them because we have a need for them. They provide us with vital sustenance and pleasure. So, if we are told to repeat *bismillah* again and again, it must be important. *Bismillah* reminds us of *tawhid*, of the wholeness of creation. It reminds us that everything happening throughout creation is happening in the name of God. *Bismillah* grounds us in reality, returns us to a state of awareness, and turns our praise, gratitude, and love toward God.

When Prophet Nuh (Noah), peace be upon him, got onto the ship what he said is very interesting: He said: "*Embark in this ship! In the name of God be its run and its riding at anchor!*" (Quran, Hud, 11: 41) Notice that he did not just say *bismillah* and then, "Okay, now let's do *our* work." *Bismillah* is not just the kick start, just the moment of embarkation, it is the entire journey. Yet often when we say *bismillah*, we immediately disconnect and carry on doing things in our own name. It's as if the *bismillah* is like plugging in our laptop, and after that, we take over and do all our work. But here Nuh, peace be upon him, says in the name of God be the whole process from beginning to the end. We can take *bismillah* to heart when we see that the entire universe acts with God's power and will, in God's name, and therefore what we do is also in God's name. Let us remember how in the first revelation, Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is not instructed to say *bismillah* and then read. Rather, he is told to read in the name of his Sustainer.

The remembrance should be an integral part of the actual reading, that is, it affects how we read. In this way, *bismillah* means we bring remembrance into the full processes that we engage in, such that *tawhid*, real awareness of divine oneness, becomes a way of being in the world, that is, something that transforms how we move,

Bismillah is HOW we live

think, and feel *throughout* our daily activities. Everything will look different then and we will begin to see the deeper meaning and purpose around us.

> *Behold in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those who are endowed with insight [and] who remember God when they stand, and when they sit, and when they lie down to sleep, and [thus] reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: "O our Sustainer! You have not created any of this without meaning and purpose."*
>
> (Quran, Imran, 3:190-191)

When these verses were revealed, the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, woke up in the night and wept. When Bilal, may God be pleased with him, came in the morning for prayer, his beard was soaked with tears. Bilal asked, "Why are you weeping when God has forgiven all of your sins?" The Prophet replied, "O Bilal, won't I be a grateful servant?" Then he added, "How can I not weep when these verses have been revealed to me?" Then he said, "Woe to the one who reads this and does not reflect on it!" Ali, may God be pleased with him, reported that when the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, woke up at night he would contemplate the sky and recite this *ayah*, "*Behold in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those who are endowed with insight...*"[52]

The Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, engaged with the Quranic *ayah*, he wept in gratitude, joy and awe that everything is a sign to God's Beautiful Attributes, and he contemplated the night and how it is succeeded by the day especially at daybreak, when daylight first appear. If we meditate the way the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, did and we internalize the reality that everything is an *ayah* and like a mirror, then when you see these mirrors throughout creation, they will remind us of their Maker and of His Beautiful Attributes. Then our hearts too, will be filled with awe, and joy and gratitude.

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[52] Related by Fahraddin Razi in his commentary on this verse in *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*.

Tasbihat: All Beings Praising

> *Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all that are in the heavens and on earth extol...*
>
> (Quran, Nur, 24:41)

The Quran tells us both that everything in the heavens and the earth is a sign and that everything also glorifies God. *Tasbih* is the act of praising God; it is the declaration of *subhanallah*, meaning *all glory and praise be to God*! *Tasbih* is the message that all the signs are carrying to us. *Tasbih* is a declaration of God's perfection made by the tongue, the heart, and other ways of being. "*even the birds as they spread out their wings...*" These creatures fly with incredible grace and agility. They are beautiful from the patterns of their feathers to the patterns of their flights. Just watching them can fill us with a sense of tranquility and awe. Along with the peaceful grace of their movements across the sky, birds, *as they spread out their wings*, also reveal the perfection of their bodies, the light bones and soft feathers designed to lift them into the air. And they fly with multiple purposes, to find food, make homes, find safety, yet without any look of stress or anxiety. Even during a hunt, as predators or prey, their movements speak of grace and ease. All these aspects of birds, as they spread out their wings, speaks to the perfection and majesty to their Maker. They make *tasbih* through their very being, and indeed, they know how to pray unto Him.

> *Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all that are in the heavens and on earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each knows indeed how to pray unto Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all that they do.*
>
> *For, God's is the sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and with God is all journeys' end.*
>
> *Do you not see that it is God who causes the clouds to move onward, then joins them together, then piles them up in masses, until thou can see rain come forth from their midst? And He it is who sends down from the skies, by degrees, mountainous masses [of clouds] charged with hail, striking therewith whomever He wills and averting it from*

whomever He wills, the while| the flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their| sight!

(Quran, Nur, 24:41-43)

All things in the heavens and the earth extol God's limitless glory. Each knows [illegible] *How.* Water rising into clouds, falling as rain, flowing as rivers, over and underground, and as waves and currents in the ocean, through plants and all creatures of land and sea, seeds in their simplicity and the majestic fields and forests that sprout up from them. Rocks in their seeming stillness yet remarkable transformations. All things in the heavens and on earth extol His limitless glory. God is the Subtle. The One who subdues and brings forth. All beautiful attributes belong to Him. How do we know? Go out and see how everything around us makes *tasbih*; how reflect His attributes without claiming ownership, they are transparent mirrors. Their *tasbih* can be heard, not in words, but in the language of their dispositions (their bodies, their movements, and so on), and in the perfect synchronicity within and amongst them. *Subhanallah!* Glory be to God!

When we become aware that everything glorifies God, and makes *tasbih*, what do we do? Join in! In one of his commentaries, Imam Nursi compares creation to an orchestra with everything reciting and chanting the names of God, and those who become aware of this, also join in. The Quran is inviting us to join them in their glorifications. As humans, we are not alone in our worship. In fact, when we praise God, we harmonize ourselves with the rest of creation. When we forget, we are at odds with the rest of creation, but whenever we remember, we come together in praise. The Quran tells us how Prophet Dawud (David), peace be upon him, was not making *tasbih* on his own but together with the mountains and the birds.

And We caused the mountains to join Dawud in glorifying God, and likewise the birds.

(Quran, Anbiya, 21:79)

Behold, We caused the mountains to join him (Dawud) in glorifying God at sunset and at sunrise.

(Quran, Sad, 38:18)

Have you ever noticed when the birds wake up and begin their song? It is not when the sky turns blue or when the sun rises over the horizon, but at the first hint of light. When we rise for *fajr* (dawn) prayer, we join them in worship. Sunrise and sunset —these times often capture our attention. When we watch the sun rise in the sky beneath clouds of orange, purple, and pink, we often feel a moment of awe and reflection. All on earth and in the heavens are extolling His Glory. And the more we learn to reflect upon the signs we see, the more we will hear this praise around us, anytime, anywhere.

When we start *reading* the *ayaat* and listening to their messages, we will hear them testifying that all the beauty and perfection around us in the world belongs to Him alone. And to the extent that we love those beautiful attributes we will come to love God and praise Him. When we see a beautiful flower for instance, we will say, "*Blessed be God, the Best of Creators.*[53] How beautifully it has been made...Glory be to you (*subhanaka)!* You are so Loving (*wadud*) and Beautiful *(Jamil)* that You have embellished Your creation with beauty and artistry. You *make most excellent everything that You create.*[54]" In this way, we glorify (*tasbih)* the Maker with His beautiful names. That is, *tasbih* unfolds when we become proficient in reading the creational *ayaat* (signs) with the guidance of the Quranic *ayaat*. And when we read in the name of God, we are able to confirm that He is far above the partners that heedlessly may be ascribed to Him.[55]

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[53] "*We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh - and then We bring [all] this into being as a new creation: Therefore,* ***Blessed be God, the Best of Creators!"*** (Quran, Mu'minun, 23:14) "*Blessed be He in whose hand is the Sovereignty, since He has the power to will anything."* (Quran, Mulk, 67:1)

[54] God "*makes most excellent everything that He creates.*" (Quran, Sajdah, 32:7)

[55] "*God's Judgment is [bound to] come: do not, therefore, call for its speedy advent! Glory be to God and sublimely exalted above all that they associate (with Him)!*" (Quran, Nahl,16:1)

They worship, side by side with God that which neither harms nor benefits them, saying, "These are our intercessors with God!" Say: "Would you inform God of that which He doesn't know in the heavens or on earth? Glory be to God and exalted be He above all that they associate (with Him)!"

(Quran, Yunus, 10:18)

Have they, then, any deity other than God? Glory be to God and exalted be He above all that they associate (with Him)!

(Quran, Tur, 52:43)

And [thus it is:] thy Sustainer creates whatever He wills; and He chooses [for humankind] whatever is best for them. Glory be to God, and sublimely exalted above all that they associate (with Him)!

(Quran, Qasas, 28:68)

Glory be to your Sustainer, the Lord of almightiness, and exalted is He above all that they may devise by way of definition! And peace be upon all His message-bearers! And all praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds!

(Quran, Saffat, 37:10-182)

When we become aware that God is above any partners or imperfection that the heedless may attribute to Him, we glorify our Sustainer with the testimony of all His signs in creation, *subhanallah* (Glory be to God). That is, just as heedlessness pollutes our understanding of God with *shirk*, conscious faith and reading in the name of God leads us to know Him with all His attributes of perfection and that He is indeed above any imperfection that the *mushrik*s (those who commit *shirk*) may ascribe to Him: this is *tasbih*.

"And no true understanding of God have they who worship aught beside Him', inasmuch as the whole of the earth will be as a [mere] handful to Him on Resurrection Day, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand: limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above all that they associate (with Him)!" (Quran, Zumar, 39:67)

Just as the first Quranic *ayah* says, *Read in the name of your Sustainer*, many *ayaat* in the Quran also invite us to glorify in the name our Sustainer (*Rabb*): "*Glorify, then, in the name of your Sustainer the Mighty!*" (Quran, al-Waqi'a, 56:74).[56] They call us to simply glorify Him constantly:

And remember your Sustainer unceasingly, and extol His limitless glory by night and by day.

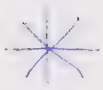
(Quran, Imran, 3:41)

O you who have believed! Remember God with unceasing remembrance and glorify Him from morn to evening. He it is who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels [echoing Him], so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. And, indeed, He is much Compassionate unto the believers.

(Quran, Ahzab, 33:41-43)

Hence, bear with patience whatever they (who deny the truth) may say, and glorify your Sustainer with praise before the rising of the sun and before its setting.
And glorify Him, too, during some of the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you might attain to happiness.

(Quran, Ta-Ha, 20:130)



Hence, remain patient in adversity - for, verily, God's promise always comes true - and ask forgiveness for thy sins, and glorify your Sustainer with praise by night and by day. Behold, as for those who call God's ayaat *in question without having any evidence there is in their hearts nothing but overweening self-conceit, which they will never be able to satisfy: seek, then, refuge with God - for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing!*

(Quran, Ghafir, 40:55-56)

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[56] Also see: Quran, Waqi'a, 56:96 and Haqqah, 69:52.

> *And so, await in patience your Sustainer's judgment, for you are well within Our sight (i.e. under our protection) and glorify your Sustainer and praise Him whenever you rise up, and glorify Him at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*
>
> (Quran, Tur, 52:48-49)

> *Hence, [O believer,] bear with patience whatever they may say, and glorify your Sustainer and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, glorify Him, and at every prayer's end.*
>
> (Quran, Qaf, 50:38-39)

> *And bear in mind your Sustainer's name at morn and evening and during some of the night, and prostrate yourself before Him, and glorify Him throughout the long night.*
>
> (Quran, Insan, 76:25-26)

Thus glorifying God (*tasbih*) is a practice of those who remember God constantly and believe in His *ayaat*,

> *Only they [truly] believe in Our signs (ayaat) who, whenever they are conveyed to them, fall down, prostrating themselves in adoration, and glorify their Sustainer with praise and who are never filled with false pride.*
>
> (Quran, Sajdah, 32:15)

As they declare His perfection, the believers are also enjoined to praise God.

> *So glorify your Sustainer and praise Him, and be of those who prostrate themselves in adoration, and worship your Sustainer till certainty comes to you.*
>
> (Quran, Hijr, 15:98-99)

Hence, trust the Living One who dies not, and glorify Him with praise: for none is as aware of His creatures' sins as He.

(Quran, Furqan, 25:58)

Glorify your Sustainer and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness: for, behold, He is ever an Acceptor of Repentance.

(Quran, Nasr, 110:3)

As we have seen, *tasbih* or glorifying God is not restricted to human beings. Many Quranic chapters (*surah*), which are known as the *musabbihat*, start with verses stating that everything glorifies God.

All that is in the heavens and on earth glorifies God: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!

(Quran, Hadid, 57:1)

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth glorifies God: for He alone is almighty, truly wise.

(Quran, Hashr, 59:1 and Saff, 61:1)

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth glorifies God, the Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise!

(Quran, Jumu'a, 62:1)

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth glorifies God: His is all sovereignty, and to Him all praise is due; and He has the power to will anything.

(Quran, Taghabun, 64:1)

And the thunder glorifies Him with praise, and [so do] the angels, in awe of Him.

(Quran, Ra'd, 13:13)

Throughout the Quran, we are informed again and again that everything glorifies God.

> *Do you not see that it is God that all that is in the heavens and on earth glorify, even the birds as they spread out their wings? [Each of them] knows indeed how to pray unto Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all what they do for, God's is the sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and with God is all journeys' end.*
>
> (Quran, Nur, 24:41-42)

This reality that everything glorifies God, that they make *tasbih*, must be very important to be emphasized this much in the Quran. This is because *tasbih* is related to *tawhid*. When we become aware how everything glorifies its Maker, there remains no room for *shirk*. It is therefore crucial for us to be able to confirm the *tasbih* of beings and events, which is observable as stated in the above *ayah* (24:41) and then to join in and glorify God ourselves.

But how do we, as human beings engage in the *tasbih*? The birds spread out their wings; how about us? What do we do? In our day-to-day struggles, glorifying and praising God in all what we do may not seem as effortless as birds taking flight. So how do we join them in their *tasbih*? Our *tasbih* emerges from our awareness, our remembrance. When we read the *ayaat*, such as 'the birds spreading out their wings' in the name of our Sustainer, and we witness God's Attributes reflected therein, *tasbih* emerges effortlessly, and praising God ensues spontaneously. As a result, *tawhid* becomes our lived reality and we start responding to life with conscious praise of our Sustainer. For just like all beings glorify God and make *tasbih* through their state of being, we also glorify our Sustainer and praise, not only with words (*subhanallah* and *alhamdulillah*) but also through our living in the name of our Sustainer and attributing all goodness and perfection to Him and therefore praising Him alone and being grateful to Him alone.

We can thus see that when we interpret the signs right, they all lead to praise. If not, we are stuck in our misperceptions and fail to see the flawlessness of what God has sent our way. If this happens,

just be patient, acknowledge the signs in and around you and listen for their messages. When we begin to open up to their messages, our response to life turns into *tasbih*. When good things happen, we remain conscious that our achievements are not from us. We say *alhamdulillah* and *Allahu akbar*: Praise be to God; He is the Greatest. We recognize our achievement as gifts, and know that we are merely vehicles of God's Beautiful Attributes, like conscious mirrors reflecting His Beautiful Names. This situation leads not to boasting but to gratitude and praise. Alternately, when we find ourselves thinking something in creation is bad, we say *subhanallah*, God is above any imperfection and any deficiency that we think we see in creation is the result of our own misperception, and we open ourselves to revising our misperception.

In troubling situations, our *tasbih* follows the example of the prophet Yunus (Jonah), may peace be upon him, who, in the belly of the whale, turned back to God, saying, "I am among the wrongdoers. I am the one who wronged myself, not You." (Quran, Anbiya, 21:87) We forgot and in our state of *ghafla* we thought that just because we didn't like what happened, it was bad, as though we were the point of reference for what is good and what is bad. When in fact we do not know what is really good or what is really bad. We forgot who we are–created beings with limited knowledge, beings whose needs are met by the One—and hence we forgot that our Sustainer is nothing less than the Compassionate whose compassion encompasses everything. Why? Because we perceived our situation as a bad thing, something we needed to escape, then we also saw the whale, storm, and sea as enemies. We forgot that all of this comes from You, the Most Compassionate, the All-Knowing. It is as if we close our eyes and then say there is no light. And even if we are told about the presence of light, we say, okay I will open my eyes after I see the light. I will only surrender once everything is fine. But we will not be able to realize that everything is fine until we surrender. We will not be able to see the light unless we open our eyes first.

The word "*muslim*" means someone who is the in the process of surrendering. The opposite of surrendering is resisting. "No! Why is this happening to me?" "That was bad. It should not have happened." When we are objecting, we are not open to see the

signs of wisdom and compassion in our life. That state of resistance is just the opposite of surrendering. We are not going with the flow, but instead, we close our eyes and say it is dark, it is dark. Even when it seems dark, let us look for the light. Maybe we closed the door. Maybe there is a switch. Surrender. That is when we will realize how everything, the good and the seeming bad, glorifies God and makes *tasbih*.

> *The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, and the earth, and all that they contain; and there is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise: but you fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him!*
>
> (Quran, Isra, 17:44)

Everything is in the state of *tasbih*, meaning that everything is clearly an *ayah* reflecting the qualities of the Maker. But often we cannot see clearly. Everything shows the right direction, the direction of the light. *The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, and the earth, and all that they contain*: there is not a single thing that does not extol His glory. We simply fail to grasp their manner of glorifying.

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth glorifies God.*
>
> (Quran, Hashr, 59:1)

> *God is He save whom there is no deity: the Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the One with whom all salvation rests, the Giver of Faith, the One who determines what is true and false, the Almighty, the One who subdues wrong and restores right, the One to whom all greatness belongs! Glory be to God. He is above all that they associate (with Him).*
>
> *He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! To Him alone belong attributes of perfection (i.e. the Beautiful Names). All that is in the heavens and on earth glorifies Him: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!*
>
> (Quran, Hashr, 59:23-24)

Surah al-Hashr starts with the statement that everything glorifies God and ends (verse 24 is the last verse of *surah al-Hashr)* with the beautiful attributes belonging to God alone. Thus, we can see the connection between everything making *tasbih* and the attributes of perfection. If the latter belong only to God then there is only One to worship and seek help from, and only One that is being worshiped and sustains everything; that is *tawhid*. That is why *tawhid* of *uluhiyya*, simply saying *God is one*, is not enough. We need to be aware of *tawhid* of *rububiyya*, that there is only One who is taking care of everything. The more aware of the reality of *tawhid*, the more we see how in God all beautiful qualities are unified.

In other words, *tawhid* means there is oneness in all the names of God. If all the attributes of perfection belong to Him alone, is there a need for another deity? Can we worship anything else when all things worthy of worship and adoration come from Him and belong to Him alone? He is the source of everything so all our gratitude and joy goes back to Him. That is the essence of worship. When we think that He is the Provider and with worship we are giving something in return, worship becomes a burden. But worship is not a burden. It is an opportunity to express our gratitude and love. It is not only an opportunity but an honor. If we think of it as a burden, it means we are not aware who God is, who we are and our relationship with Him. And what we do then is not truly worshiping God for we do not know who we are worshipping. There is no worship without knowledge and awareness.

In the Quran, it says *"I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me."* (Quran, Dhariyat, 51:56) When we hear this we might say, "But I have my own life. And anyway, how do we know all the beautiful names belong to Him? Maybe they do not?" The Quran says, just go and look around: everything, all that is in the heavens and the earth, glorifies Him, makes *tasbih* to Him. We look at water and say that without water there will be no life. In the Quran, God says He gives life to everything with water. Water itself does not have life, but through it life is given to every single living being. It is as if it knows all of their unique atoms and their intricate arrangement. When we reflect on this, we can hear the *tasbih* of water. It is telling us: "Life is not from me. Can't you see, whoever

made all of these things is making me this way? He is the one who is taking care of all our needs at once. He is the Rabb." So, we drink water *bi-ismi-'Allah*, not in its name but in the name of God. We eat *bismillah*, thinking, You gave us this food along with our need for it, so that we can feel this spiritual joy. First the satisfaction is physical, but when we reflect more deeply, it becomes spiritual, and we start seeing the divine names reflecting there. Our physical body benefits from the physical properties of food, but our spirit is the one that fully tastes it. We get a taste of meeting the Caring, Loving, and Sustaining One. The One who feeds us and quenches our thirst.

We feel the closeness to God mentioned in the Quran when He said, *"We are closer to you than your own jugular vein"* (Quran, Qaf, 50:16). We feel the divine presence. God is no longer some empty word: He is the One whose beauty and Beautiful Names we see in the mirrors of everything. In this state of awareness, our *tasbih* unfolds spontaneously, and we find ourselves glorifying in the name of our Sustainer (*Rabb*), the Almighty: Glory be to my Sustainer, the Almighty *(subhana Rabbiya al-'adheem)*.[57]

Now that we have reflected, when we see signs in creation, we will remember, and when we do not remember simply by seeing, we can just say the blessed phrases which are like keys: *bismillah or subhanallah*. When we say *bismillah* and *subhanallah*, let us unlock our awareness.

I hope we all realize how crucial these Quranic teachings are. Let's take the time to reflect on their significance and on their relevance to how we live our lives so we may fulfill the purpose of being here on earth, the purpose of being created, the only purpose that satisfies the human heart.

May we each receive beneficial knowledge and may we benefit from it.

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[57] *"Glorify then* ***in*** *the name of your Sustainer, the Mighty."* (Quran, Waqi'a, 56:74)

Glory be unto You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You alone who is the Knowing, the Wise.

(Quran, Baqara, 2:32)

Pain is inevitable; unavoidable.
Suffering is not.

with: indicating responsibility

With Allah's name

do something Knowing that Allah is ultimately responsible.

with: affected by (a particular factor and.)

do something " Affected by the fact of Allah's:

mercy
Power
creativity
justice, etc..

in: used when referring to something that is done as a result of something else

in Allah's name

do something as a result of Allah's.

mercy
power
creativity, etc.

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This book brings us to the heart of Islam, the living art of surrendering to the will of God. Familiar terms and concepts are revealed in a new light and take on deeper relevance in our lives. This book will show how the different parts of the Quranic message fit together. Bouguenaya reawakens the meaning of utterances so familiar they often bypass our hearts even as they roll fluidly off our tongues. "La ilaha illallah." There is no god but God. What does it mean? Why is it repeated so often in the Quran and in worship? Bouguenaya returns us to these basics, and stays there, allowing their profound implications to seep in.

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